




烙印の紋章 X

竜の雌伏を風は嘆いて

杉原智則
イラスト●3

 電撃文庫

RAKUIN NO MONSHOU

– Emblem of the Branded –

- Volume 10 -

THE WIND LAMENTS THAT THE DRAGON LIES LOW

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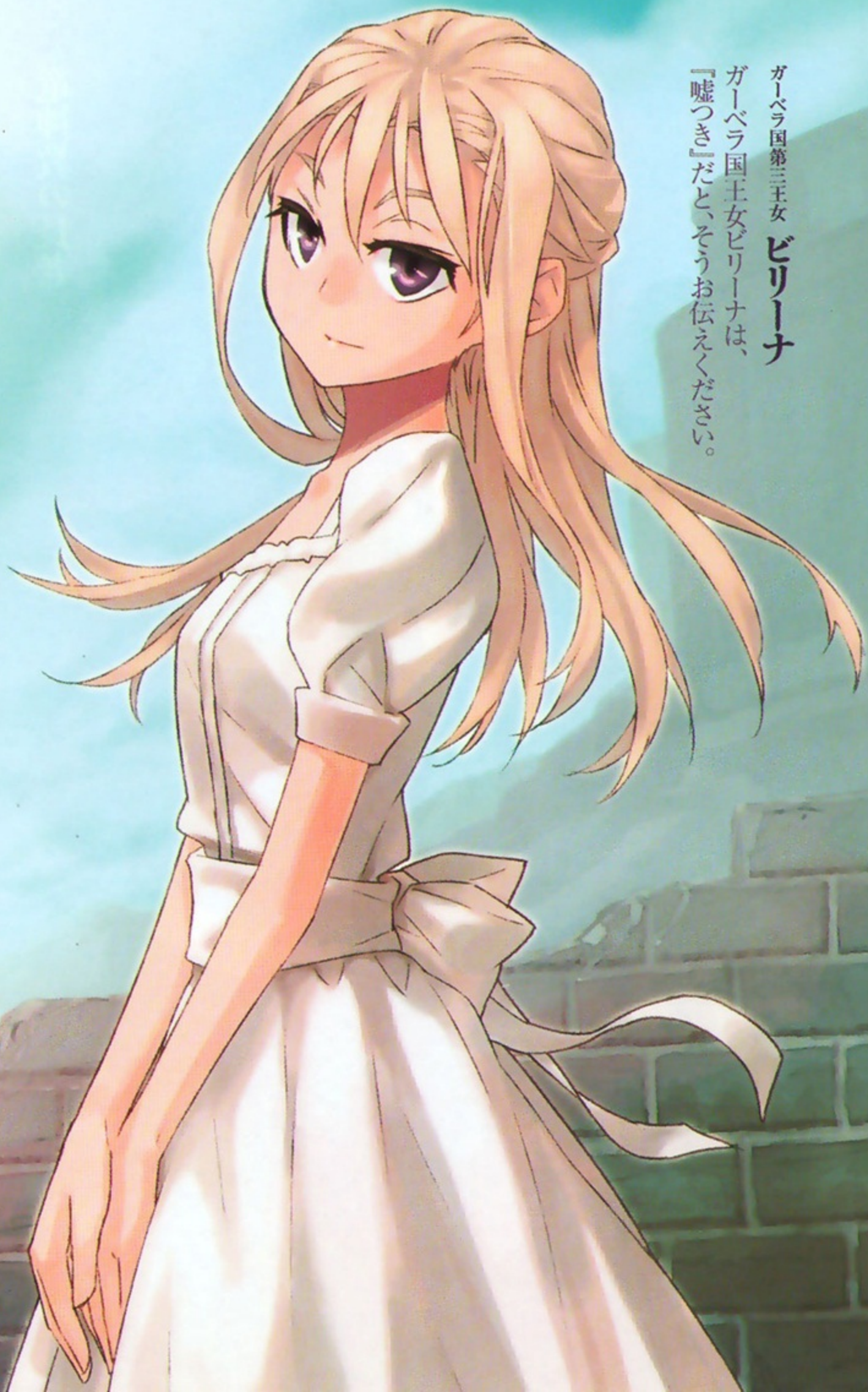
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[Translated by: Baka-Tsuki]

偽りの皇太子 **オルバ**
単刀直入にいおう。おれに、力を貸す気はないか。



ガーベラ国第三王女 **ビリーナ**
ガーベラ国王女ビリーナは、
『嘘つき』だと、そうお伝えください。



竜神教の長老

ギル・メフィウスを殺させるのだ。



元メライウス近衛士官の娘

ライラ

わたくしを、覚えていらつしやらないのですか、殿下。



風に、きらきらとする髪を散らしながら、少女が船から降り立ってくる。

と、思いもかけぬ出迎えに、一瞬目をみはった。

「オルバ。お久しぶりです」

「は」

オルバは「礼したが、次の言葉が出てこない。

（アプターからはるばるご苦労さまです）

とでもいうつもりだったが、

なんだか自分が口にするに皮肉のように

聞こえてしまうのではないかと、

要らぬ危惧を抱いたせいだ。

ピリーナのほうは気にせず、

西方の村で命を救われた礼を口にし、

また、同じくオルバに家族を救われたライラを紹介した。

「また、殿下にこそ使われているのですか」

「それは……いえ、なぜです」

「お忙しくしていらつしやるようですから」



大陸中央部



烙印の紋章X

竜の雌伏を風は嘆いて

杉原智則

イラスト●3

PROLOGUE

“Your Highness,” **he** called out, then abruptly fell silent.

The one before him was undoubtedly the crown prince of Mephius. However, as he currently had a tankard of beer filled to the brim in his right hand, while his left one was firmly wrapped around the waist of a half-sitting prostitute, that particular form of address was completely inappropriate.

“Your friend calls you ‘Your Highness’?” The prostitute laughed, visibly amused.

The crown prince of Mephius opened his mouth wide as he roared with laughter. “That’s his way of being sarcastic. Look at what an educated face he has. Whenever he wants to look down on the ignorant me, that’s how he calls me.”

The Prince gulped down his alcohol. However, when **he** cleared his throat with a sullen expression, the crown prince shoved away the prostitute, looking rather fed-up.

“Go along, there’ll be complicated talks about national affairs from here on. Can’t hold them in front of a tart.”

“What’s that, Idiot!” The prostitute puffed out her cheeks at the harsh words. But her rouged lips immediately curved into a smile. “Well then, see you, ‘Your Highness’. Next time you’re around, please look me up.”

She gave him a formal curtsy and then, laughing shrilly, she started throwing flirtatious glances at other customers. A few minutes later, her backside was already sitting on yet another man’s knee.

The air was filled both with the stench, close to the odour of beasts, of alcohol turned sour, as well as with the incessant din of lewd jokes, of rogues raising their voices angrily, and of the laughing cajoling of prostitutes.

“You really are careless,” the crown prince smiled cynically, “Marching into a place like this, you stick out like a sore thumb. Here, drink.”

“No, I...”

“Aren’t we friends who used to have drinking bouts until dawn in the old days? Oi, you lot, some decent booze for Lord Jurome.”

‘Lord Jurome’ was the nickname that he gave **him** when they wanted to hide their identities.

He sighed again. “I can’t take those kinds of excesses anymore, Argos.”

Given where they were, he called the crown prince by his alias.

‘Argos’ flashed his teeth. “You sound like an old man. Since you’re three years older than me, you shouldn’t even be thirty yet.”

“I’m not that young anymore. The same goes for you, Argos. At the very least, you can’t keep going out all night without a single thought to your own safety.”

“If we’re talking about settling down, you go first. I’m prudent by nature. Once I’ve watched you set up a family, and after you’ve provided me with enough reference material, then I’ll take my time carefully choosing a bride.”

“What’s this about you getting married, Argos, Your Excellency?”

A man at the same table turned his ruddy face towards them. His head was wrapped in bandages. Blood was still seeping through them. It was not only him; the dozen or so men at the table all had injuries to their faces or limbs. It was hardly surprising. Only a few days earlier, they had all been standing on a battlefield awash with murderous roars.

“If you’re choosing a bride, go for a woman from the southern coasts. The women from Zonga especially, their passion runs deep and their chests are abundant. Not only that, in a fight, they’ll use the self-defence swords they got from their parents to protect their man.”

“You can only talk about what you know, but this guy doesn’t know any other kind of woman, Excellency,” another man barged in. “Now *I’m* an expert on this point. I’ve even slept with island girls from Baroll. If you want to feel like there’s a fire burning beneath your skin, there’s nothing like them.”

“Nonono, noblewomen from Ende are the way to go. They’re not like clodhopping Mephian women, they’re cultured and refined. And more importantly, they have

smooth skin! There's a story about those fat merchants from the northern coasts offering to exchange their own weight in gold for them when they all pleaded with the Ende nobles."

The number of people chiming in kept increasing and it turned into a review of the women of each country. The man referred to as Lord Jurome was the only one who did not get involved, instead staring up at the ceiling towards which smoke was gently wafting.

All of those around the table were old, familiar faces. But if you compared them to the informal 'pre-battle ceremony' that they had held in a similarly cheap hostel before going to war, the number of people had decreased.

They had lost the battle.

The bullets threatening at their backs and the raised swords and axes had created the sensation of a wind of steel that had buffeted both Jurome and Argos repeatedly. No matter how much alcohol he drank, the scenes of his friends falling in front of his eyes would not vanish from Jurome's retinas. Yet even so, Argos and the others still joked around idly and gulped down cheap alcohol, just as they had during that 'pre-battle ceremony'.

Strangely enough, that battlefield was the same one on which Argos – the crown prince of Mephius, had taken part in his first campaign.

That had been eight years ago. The land that they had seized from their neighbouring country, Garbera, at that time had been snatched back by an army led by King Jeorg Owell in person.

The crown prince's forces had steadily been cut down, and he had lost a great many of his men. Even so, his thirst for victory was insatiable and Argos had every intention of fighting to the bitter end, but had been forced to turn back when he received direct orders from his father, the emperor of Mephius. Thereupon, the first place he had headed for was this tavern.

Eventually, having settled his bill, Argos left the store with just Jurome in tow. They headed towards the stables. Argos, ever generous, handed an excessively large tip to a pimply-faced stable boy. Then, ignoring the boy's repeated thanks, he leapt onto his still-fastened horse.

After that, Argos spurred his horse into a gallop and sank into such morose silence that it seemed hard to believe that he had been merrymaking at the tavern.

Jurome followed him, also in silence.

They halted their horses at the usual place.

They were at the top of a hill that commanded an unbroken view of the centre of Solon. Normally, several soldiers on watch would be stationed there, but Jurome had gone there a little earlier and had asked them to turn their posts over to him. Thanks to that, there was no sign of anyone around.

The 'Black Tower' rose tall in the middle of the twinkling lights from the houses.

"About that topic a while back..." Jurome said as he sat down beside Argos, who was lying sprawled in the grass.

"A while back?"

"About your bride."

"Oh," Argos pulled an uninterested face and turned on his side, half covering his head as he did so.

"Think about it seriously. It's high time. Since you became the crown prince, it's no longer your problem alone."

"Do I have to?"

"Of course you do. For you who are going to be emperor, Mephius is a bit like your own child. There are parts that a father alone cannot see. For a child, a mother is obviously needed. You have strong arms to lift a child up, but you don't have breasts to give it comfort."

"No, alas," taking it as a joke, Argos stifled his laughter. "If you're going to bring that topic up again, then all I have to say is, what about you? Do you have a woman in mind?"

"Alas as well."

“If you get too annoying, I’ll use the authority of the imperial family to push a bride onto you. But only after having picked all the most unattractive aristocratic girls and having drawn one by lots.”

For nobles to get married, the permission of the Mephian imperial family was needed. Moreover, as Argos had mentioned in jest, the imperial family could decide on a noble’s marriage partner, and even had the right to order a divorce. Thus, when nobles got married, they needed to pay a heavy tax to avoid seeing them use those rights. In other words, since the whole point was the tax itself, just like the right to the first night, there were hardly any historical cases in which they had exercised those prerogatives, so that you could say that this authority was purely nominal. Jurome grimaced nonetheless, probably feeling that his old friend was capable of anything.

Argos laughed all the more. And then he once again fell silent.

“His Majesty has become a coward,” the crown prince said abruptly. “I heard that back when he stood on the battlefield in person, at least he wasn’t like *that*. And in this last war too, although it’s true that for a moment, we were being pushed back by the enemy, but we should have held out. That war was winnable.”

“The enemy brought out an impressive amount of airships,” Jurome chose his words carefully. “Whereas we didn’t even have enough cavalymen; the difference in mobility was huge. His Majesty had probably calmly assessed the situation. Don’t be impatient. He foresaw that there would be a ‘next time’ once we’ve worked out enough counter-measures. We’ve only lost for now.”

“Once we’re defeated, soldiers lose their morale. It can chip away at the country’s unity.”

“Oh?”

“What, Simon?” Pulling an unpleasant face, the crown prince called **him** by his real name. “Whenever you use that tone of voice, it means you really are going to act like an old man.”

“Well then, let me ask you something, Guhl,” Simon Rodloom shut one eye. “You’re saying that once you’re sitting on the emperor’s throne, you will continue to win, no matter what kind of war it is or who the enemy is?”

“Of course,” Argos – no, Guhl Mephius, immediately replied.

Oh – Simon hummed again. “An emperor is not a god, Guhl. Even though he has the highest authority in the country, he cannot freely make use of the entire country, or of the people’s lives.”

“No, he has to be a god, Simon.” Guhl suddenly stood up straight. Gazing straight ahead, he took the sword at his waist in his hand. “Or at the very least, the retainers and the people have to think of him as a god-like existence. If they do so, their spirits will be united, and with the country as one, it will demonstrate a strength not to be defeated by anyone. And then there won’t be any unnecessary victims, and nor will any needless fights spring up within it.”

“...”

“Of course, my father has his own Mephius, as I have my image of the nation. It’s like your theory about it being like child-rearing. I’ll make my child grow up big in my own way.”

“Your Highness Guhl...”

“I’ll worry about a bride after that,” Guhl looked at Simon, who had also stood up, from the corner of his eyes. “Honestly, I haven’t even thought about it. Right now, you’re basically my wife.”

He then closed his eyes. What appeared in the darkness that fell before his retinas was probably the same thing that Simon had seen in the cheap ale-house. As proof of that, Guhl said in a voice that was almost a whisper,

I’m glad you didn’t die.

CHAPTER 1

CALM

PART 1

At first glance, Birac, Mephius' second city and largest centre for foreign trade, was enveloped in an atmosphere of victory. But if they could see the expressions on a great many people's faces in the street or observe the groups gathered here and there in the shade, exchanging whispered conversations, even an outsider would easily be able to see that the people of Birac harboured complicated feelings in their hearts, and would wonder – *what victory?*

Five days earlier, Crown Prince Gil Mephius, leading an army from Apta in the southwest, had clashed with a punitive force dispatched from Solon. Although the number of soldiers in the punitive force far exceeded that of the crown prince's army, they had been toyed around with by stratagem after stratagem, had been pushed back by their opponent's dauntless determination, and had fled back to Birac. The lord of Birac, Fedom Aulin, would let them in and, along with the soldiers who had remained in the city, they would fortify their defences and hold out until reinforcements arrived from the capital – or so they thought, until they suddenly found the gates of the city firmly shut and their entrance denied.

With their path cut off both in front and behind them, they could do nothing but prepare for certain defeat, so the commander of the punitive force, Folker Baran, had resigned himself to surrendering. As a result, when Gil Mephius' victorious troops appeared within Birac, the populace lined the streets waving and cheering, and the mood on display was one of welcome.

Just a day before the battle occurred, the populace received a notification from Fedom Aulin. Via the various branch offices of Birac's merchant guild, they were informed that he would support the crown prince. Going back another half day earlier, the heads of the guild had gathered at Fedom's residence.

Naturally, the merchants did not just consent without a single word of objection. Supporting the crown prince meant choosing to oppose the current emperor, Guhl Mephius. Which also meant that, in the expanding civil war, Mephius would make

Birac a target for attack.

All the leading members of the guild stared at the lord of Birac with – *Is he serious?* – written clearly on their faces.

And of course, the populace shared that sentiment.

Take for example Apta in the southwest: being next to Taúlia, it would fear taking direct damage if a war broke out with the West. Birac meanwhile was closer to Solon. So just as the people of Apta felt that they wanted to avoid war with the West as much as possible, the populace of Birac had strong apprehensions when it came to battles with Solon.

Still, even within Birac there was, of course, a variety of opinions.

When news had arrived that a person claiming to be the crown prince had appeared in Apta, practically on the eve of battle, and had openly declared his opposition to the march on the West, many in Birac received a considerable shock.

As previously mentioned, Birac was a commercial city. Compared to other regions, it had from the start had a high sense of self-governance; so when merchants met in the street, they were used to talking together not only about business but also, and quite unreservedly, about politics.

“So basically, was His Majesty going to march on the West even if it meant hiding the fact that the crown prince had survived?”

“Rather than saying that he hid it, there’s that rumour that he was planning to personally do away with his son. Lord Gil might have realised it ahead of time and faked his own death.”

“Nonono, the one who showed up in Apta is an impostor. Probably just someone who admired Gil Mephius’ heroic deeds and who was driven to madness by too much chivalrous spirit.”

“In that case, why are even General Rogue and General Odyne following him?”

“Couldn’t it be that, from the start, those two were at the centre of the uprising? And that they deliberately used the crown prince’s name to garner sympathy from the lords all around Mephius?”

“In any case...”

“Right, in any case, troops will soon be dispatched from Solon.”

“It’ll be decided in one battle.”

Decided – What would be decided would be whether it would end as no more than an uprising in a provincial town or whether it would develop into civil war throughout Mephius, but there was also the meaning that the commercial city of Birac would decide what position to take from there on.

Nevertheless, nobody believed that the troops in Apta would be able to oppose Mephius’ army. And so, when the punitive force led by Folker Baran finally marched towards Apta by way of Birac, as the townspeople saw off the group gallantly arrayed in full armour, what was visible on faces everywhere was the feeling that – *Well then, that’s that.*

And so it was that, since that was the prevalent mood in Birac, when the leaders of the merchant guild responded to the summons from the lord of Birac and heard him announce that “I wish to support the crown prince, Lord Gil Mephius,” their expressions clearly read – *Is he serious?*

Sometimes passionately, sometimes calmly, Fedom spoke at length about how he had received a personal letter from the prince prior to this battle and about how Emperor Guhl Mephius was undesirable not only for the future of Birac, but for the future of Mephius as a whole.

This is ridiculous – was what most people thought. No matter how splendid his sentiments may be, the crown prince could not win. Yet at that moment, an unexpected voice rose in support of Fedom. Zaj Haman. He had been the guildmaster up until a few years ago and, even now that he had resigned from the position, he was still a wealthy merchant with enormous influence within the guild.

Contrary to expectations, instead of flatly refuting Fedom’s position, this extremely pragmatic man said, “There might be connections to be had with the West through the crown prince.”

In support of that, he pointed to the return of a ship sent by the Haman firm to the West. It had happened immediately after Taúlia and Mephius had clashed near the outskirts of Apta. Normally, there would be nothing surprising about ship and cargo

both being seized and never returned.

And yet, “I also received a verbal message from the merchants of Taúlia that they wished to continue doing business with us. Under normal circumstances, that is impossible. But if we are talking about the relationship between Taúlia and Apta... In other words, in spite of the war occurring and of His Majesty the Emperor, there is a person who could conclude a relationship of mutual trust.”

Zaj cut his words short and lapsed into silence for a while.

The leaders of the guild also simultaneously fell silent. In all honesty, it did not matter to them whether it was the real Gil Mephius who had appeared in Apta. Well, no, the current state of things inside Mephius was not something that they were unconcerned about, but neither was it something that urgently needed worrying about.

The question now was could the Gil who had appeared in Apta win? And crucially, could he use his influence to overturn the emperor’s decision?

If he has strong personal connections to the West and can drive away Folker’s army – the same thought crossed the minds of the guild leaders.

In fact, contrary to their predictions about how things would unfold, the West did not lead soldiers to assist Gil.

But even though Zaj had dangled the prospect of the West, the members of the guild did not simply jump at Fedom’s proposal.

Still, they gradually came to realize that the proposal was not a passing thought but something that Fedom had been inwardly preparing for a long time.

Moreover, business with the West was currently almost entirely handled by Zaj himself and the profits from those dealings were monopolised by the Haman firm. If the entire country could openly trade with the West, then there was a chance that all of Birac’s merchants would be able to partake of that honey.

They had gathered in the evening but it was not until dawn of the next day that they reached a consensus.

“So then, we’re doing it?”

Gil Mephius had unquestionably achieved victory.

Most of the people of Birac had also thought – *his lordship is being ridiculous* – when they received the notification of support to the prince from the guild, so this miraculous victory sent them into a frenzy.

But only temporarily.

Once their wild enthusiasm over the victory cooled down, anxiety over the future gradually started to weigh on their shoulders like an invisible stone weight.

With Apta and Birac in his hands, Gil Mephius certainly appeared to have conquered half of Mephius but it was not easy to make up for the difference in numbers compared to the emperor's side. Because of the need to face Ende and Garbera, most of Mephius' soldiers had always been distributed throughout the east of the country. Even if they gathered soldiers to their harbour town, there was still the threat that a large army from Solon might descend on them tomorrow.

The bold said, "what, if worse comes to the worse," they pointed at the cannons bought from the north that gleamed darkly beneath the eaves, "we can just line a few of those up and threaten Lord Aulin and Gil Mephius. His Majesty won't harm Birac if its citizens were the ones to rise to action and drive away the impostor."

Certainly, if the trade city of Birac were to receive damage it would have an impact on the whole of Mephius, so the emperor would not recklessly use armed force.

In the sense that they were dauntless and could calculate things realistically, the merchants of Birac were truly formidable.

Amidst the various emotions and expectations that were swaying the city, a corner of Lord Fedom Aulin's residence was wrapped in a gloomy atmosphere.

In a parlour on the second floor that overlooked the garden, breakfast had been laid out on a table covered in a white tablecloth. In terms of quantity and quality, the things laid out were excellent, but not a single one of the people around the table stretched out their hand to take them.

The general of the Black Steel Sword Division, Folker Baran. The General of the Bow of Gathering Clouds Division Yuriah Mattah. And the general of the Spear of Flames Division, Zaas Sidious. Namely, the defeated generals of the army that Crown Prince Gil Mephius had beaten in the recent battle.

Additionally, the battalion commander Walt was also there. He had been in charge of defending Jozu Fortress, situated between Apta and Birac, but had been driven out of Jozu after having fallen into Gil's trap; although he had been given the chance to actually cross swords with him on the battlefield, he had eventually been captured without having been able to kill him.

The four of them had been sitting in silence at the rectangular table for a while now. They were being kept in lenient confinement here in Birac. Early that morning, they had received summons from the crown prince, but said crown prince had yet to show up.

Perhaps an hour had passed.

Zaas Sidious could no longer endure the gloomy silence. He had a stern appearance and the look of a general of long-standing, but in fact he was the youngest of those present. He had been irritably clearing his throat for a while now.

"You, Walt, or whatever it was," he turned the brunt of that irritation towards the battalion commander. He criticised him sharply about how, despite having volunteered to be part of the defence of their headquarters in the battle, he had disgracefully been captured after not only easily letting Gil's forces through, but not even charging them from the rear.

"You, are you even a Mephian warrior? You should have stopped the enemy even if it meant holding on to them by the dragon's ass."

"Allow me to return those words to you."

Walt was a man who had formerly survived death as a sword slave and who had splendidly won the gladiatorial tournament held for the country's Founding Festival. Both of his cheeks were swollen due to the aftereffects of having been peppered with bullets but, contrary to his humorous appearance, he was subject to strong feelings.

"General Sidious, you also made mistakes. Simply because you wanted to fight Crown Prince Gil in single combat, you abandoned your Spear of Flames Division, allowing

order in the ranks to collapse and letting the crown prince's troops tear through them like paper."

"What!" Zaas' eyes flared monstrously. "You dare speak like that to me, one of the twelve generals? Fucking sword slave, looks like you didn't receive a human education."

"From the looks of it, one such as you, General Sidious, does not follow common courtesy either. If you are going to brag about being one of the twelve generals, I would appreciate it if you did so after having learned to wear the dignity of a general and especially after you earned the actual achievements of a general."

The two of them kicked back their chairs.

Naturally, they did not carry any weapons but even so, they were warriors forged in actual combat. Now that they ended up grappling barehanded, things could well develop into their killing each other.

Looking as though he found it tiresome, Yuriah shifted his chair out of the way. In both physical appearance and mannerisms, he always looked younger than he actually was. On the other hand, Folker Baran, who was now waiting motionlessly with his arms folded, was about to perfunctorily tell them to *stop it*, as he had once held the position of commander, but in part because he also recoiled from pointless fights.

"You seem to have more than enough energy," accompanying that cheerful voice, a new face appeared.

A strained expression appeared on each of their faces, including even Folker. Zaas glared at the newcomer with all the hatred he had failed to vent at Walt.

Gil Mephius.

Needless to say, the crown prince of Mephius. A man who was once believed to have died but who suddenly appeared to have resurrected in Apta; and who had then openly opposed the emperor's advance on the West, which was why he and the forces led by Folker and the others had clashed. Having taken Birac, he now held the Western half of Mephius.

According to what Folker had heard since being put under lenient arrest, the troops stationed in Apta were currently being transferred to Birac. It seemed like something

quite nondescript – *but that too* – thought Folker, directly displayed Gil Mephius' skill.

In the past, 'when he was still alive', Gil Mephius had almost arbitrarily decided on friendship with the West. This last battle had also been for the sake of protecting the western region. Therefore, he must have been linked in promise with the West, and mainly with the city-state of Taúlia. Since he had no need to defend against the west, he could simply move the troops gathered in Apta to the east.

"What is this, not eating?"

While looking around at the untouched breakfast, Gil sat in his chair. He snapped his fingers to call a page. An extravagant breakfast soon started to be laid out before him. Unlike the generals' food, which had already completely cooled, hot steam rose from it, and for a while, he wolfed it down in silence.

The crown prince had always hated formalities but having summoned the generals himself, he did not pay the slightest attention to them. When it looked like he was finally looking up, he snapped his fingers again and gave the page an order for a second helping of the egg dish. Having for the time being returned to his seat, Zaas' face once more became suffused with irritation. Just when he was obviously about to start yelling something,

"Let's get right to the point," Gil began to speak as he wiped the edge of his mouth with a handkerchief. He swept his gaze around the faces of Walt and the assembled generals, including Zaas who had been taken aback in spite of himself.

"Won't you lend me your strength?" Gil Mephius asked.

PART 2

“Our strength?”

The first to answer was Folker Baran. It was impossible to tell from his expression whether he found the offer surprising or entirely expected.

Gil nodded. “Yes. A part of the soldiers that you led are staying here in Birac, but obviously, the expense of looking after them is not negligible. If you join us, then it becomes an investment in the future, but if not, then it’s just a waste. I’d like you to properly decide on your course of action. I’ll give you five days, it should be enough time for you to think.”

“So in other words, that would mean following your orders, even if they include attacking Solon, where His Majesty the Emperor is?”

“Do you have anything to sell other than your ability to fight?”

“That is not what I meant. In short, I am asking if it is your intention to continue to fly the banner of revolt against His Majesty and to engulf Mephius in the fires of civil war.”

“This isn’t a joke!” Zaas shouted and stood up so forcefully that he knocked his chair backwards again. “General Baran, there is no need to talk directly to this kind of impostor. It’s just a waste of time. He’s no more than a rebel posing as the crown prince. Lend him our strength at this point? Ludicrous. Once you’ve crossed swords, you continue fighting until one surrenders or perishes. That is the code of a warrior.”

Compared to his fury, which was so great that it seemed flames might leap out from the finger he had thrust out, Gil was glacial.

“Being defeated by a mere impostor, where does that leave House Sidious?”

Zaas ground his teeth so fiercely that everyone sitting there could hear it. “What did you say? I didn’t lose. Have you forgotten? You ran away from single combat with me. A warrior from the Sidious House has no ears to listen to anything that a coward like you has to say.”

“If the fact that you did not personally lose means that you weren’t defeated, then why are you here? Why aren’t you singing victory songs with your companions, trampling

my impostor head underfoot? Spare me the childish argument, Zaas.”

Gil’s rebuff was like a slap to the face. Although Zaas was the youngest of the twelve generals, he was still seven or eight years older than Gil.

Zaas Sidious’ face flushed redder and redder as he continued to shout ever more violently.

“Y-You bastard, you killed Mephians. It is a warrior’s honour to die while protecting the peace of the people by crushing enemies who threaten the country from outside. But you, you manipulated Mephians with your deceitful, lying words and had them kill other Mephians. For us, there can be no greater insult than that a man like that could claim the august title of crown prince.”

Zaas had lost many of his men in the Battle of Tolinea. Even as he was screaming, his emotions overcame him and tears sprang to his eyes. Among those whose lives had been lost there were not only young men, but also commanders who had been serving since his father’s time. Men who, when he was young, had helped him practice with the sword, half in fun, and who had encouraged him, saying that – *since it’s you, Zaas, you’ll definitely become a general whose name will go down in history just as much as your father’s.*

His emotions vigorously kindled the flames within Zaas, and these could not be put out by Gil’s icy gaze.

“If we leave things as they are, the emperor of Mephius will kill more Mephians than I would.”

“What!”

“For example,” this time, the situation reversed and it was Gil thrusting a finger towards Zaas, “If I send you back naked to Solon by not returning your soldiers and weapons, how will His Majesty deal with you? How about broadcasting the information that this defeat was caused by the loss of command in your troops because you were so fixated on fighting me in single combat?”

The colour suddenly drained from Zaas’ fiery red face.

“There is no great cause. There is not a single justification which the retainers are in agreement with. It’s His Majesty who is leading the soldiers to invade another country.

It's His Majesty who is leading the soldiers to invade the country, and who will easily cut off the heads of fellow Mephians. Not for the country but for himself and his own convenience."

"..."

"Do you think that kind of country can stay standing? Do you not think that if I hadn't risen up, someone else would not have done so and would not have pointed their blade at the emperor? Not just you yourselves, anyone could predict it."

The morning sunlight was flooding the parlour. Small birds were chirping lightly outside the window. And yet, everyone other than Gil looked as though they had been robbed of two or three degrees of their body temperature.

"Sit down, Zaas."

It was Folker who had spoken. Out of sympathy, free from censure. Since he believed that the wounds to the young general's heart were such that right now, he would not listen to any instruction from the person who claimed to be the crown prince.

Zaas silently sat.

Once he had watched him do so, Folker turned towards Gil, "Indeed, a sound argument. However, I believe that in practice, a country cannot be managed on sound arguments alone, so what of you?"

"Oh?"

"What do you intend to do from now on? By criticising the emperor, you are practically using that as a shield, but what do you plan to do beyond this point?"

"You should know well enough that I can no longer turn back."

With that answer, this time it was Gil who stood up.

"P-Please wait," Folker unconsciously also half-rose to his feet.

"I want you all," Gil said, forestalling him.

It was not only Folker who stopped moving. Zaas, Yuriah who had been silent all this

time, and Walt were the same.

“I’m not telling you to die in battle for me right this second. But, Folker Baran, you are able to consider things level-headedly even on the battlefield. Yuriah Mattah: sooner or later you will be an air force commander on par with any from Garbera. Even when in difficulty, Zaas, you are bold and resolute enough to strike fear in any enemy. Walt, it is hard to come by people as upstanding and as able to take action as you are. I want all of that with me.”

The four people whose name had been called out looked at the crown prince with the same expression that a baby would have after having suddenly been slapped by its father. Gil Mephius did not attempt to persuade any further.

“I told you earlier that I would give you five days. I won’t ask you for a hurried answer. Think about it carefully.”

As abruptly and as lightly as he had appeared, he left the four people behind and exited the parlour.

Gil Mephius – or rather, the former sword slave Orba whose face bore the ‘mask’ of the crown prince, left the parlour and immediately headed towards Fedom Aulin’s private apartments on the uppermost floor of the castle. *That’s a sore point* – while he walked along the corridors, he gave a twisted smile, as though nausea had welled up within him.

Folker Baran’s question of “what do you plan to do beyond this point?” was something that Orba had been asking himself every day. Which meant that he himself had no clear answer. Hence why it was *sore*.

For example, Fedom, whom he was about to go and meet, was simply fixated on getting more power through establishing a new order in Mephius. It was for that same reason that he had gathered a group to support Gil – an anti-Emperor faction, so to speak, which had included Nabarl, whom Orba had faced directly on the battlefield not so long ago.

However, he questioned what the ‘next’ form that they dreamed of for Mephius really was.

Right, needing to stand up to the emperor's injustice – was all well and good, but after having destroyed the country's order, he needed to focus on what would come 'next'. In short, everything would not peacefully fall into place once the tyrant had been overthrown, and it was more likely for the country to fall into chaos.

In other words, Folker's question was equivalent to asking "what kind of emperor will you become?"

Yeah, if I can't give a clear answer, I won't be able to win over a man like Folker – Orba could not help thinking over it again. What kind of emperor will I become, huh?

He realised that the assumption was not incorrect, but it was impossible not to smile twistedly in a different sense at the thought that this should not be the sort of problem a boy born and raised in an arid valley, and who carried a slave brand on his back, should be worrying his head over.

Of course, Orba had already steeled his resolve. But that was the resolve to fight at the risk of his own life, and to cling on to that life for the sake of his comrades. As to what to focus on beyond that, Orba did not currently know. That was why he had taken his leave of Folker and the others, half as though to escape.

I can't stay like this forever.

It would soon be the time when he needed to have found the words to answer clearly. Even if it were only a means to rally as many people as possible, he would need to raise the banner of some great cause from now on.

Orba's expression tightened and he continued walking.

Armed soldiers were in sight dotted all along the corridors. No doubt they were there to defend the crown prince but as Orba could not remember having issued the order himself, he suspected that it came from Gowen.

Fedom had an earlier visitor.

"Ah, my lord crown prince. Thank you for taking the trouble to come."

When Fedom spoke, his earlier guest, standing across from him, looked startled and stood ramrod straight. According to Fedom's introduction, he was a messenger from Zaj Haman.

“It seems I need to be grateful to Zaj again. Let’s arrange to meet personally one of these days.”

‘Ah, y-yes,” the messenger lowered his head in a deep bow.

Recently, quite a few people who were meeting him for the first time did the same. They were not entirely able to believe in his survival, so when they met him in person, it was as though the dead truly had come back to life and their expressions showed a mixture of fear and admiration.

After the merchant had paid his respects to both the crown prince and the lord of Birac and left, Fedom looked restless.

“Zaj has a big job ahead of him. We’ll need both his air carriers and the flight routes opened up by the Haman firm to rush the written appeals to everywhere.”

“You look like you’ve been up all night,” Orba said in a deliberately carefree voice. Fedom’s eyes were bright red.

“Is this the time to sleep? We have to write letters to all the generals and lords.”

“I doubt all of them will rush to support us though.”

In contrast with Orba, who was standing with his back close to the wall and his arms folded, Fedom prowled aimlessly around the room, completely unable to calm down. He was constantly stretching out his hand to tug on his loose fitting, courtly garb.

“I don’t think everyone other than the imperial family will side with us either. Even so, if we exclude even one of them from the plan, that one might do something unexpected to frustrate it. So we need to send appeals to all of them. At the same time, it’s essential to let them believe that regardless of the other dignitaries, they’re the only ones you hold any special expectations of. This is the art of negotiation. You should leave it to me.”

Fedom had the foundations of the anti-Emperor faction that he had built up in less than a year. He was sure to be self-confident.

Orba smiled.

“Then I’ll leave it to you.”

“More importantly, there’s a more pressing issue right under our noses,” perhaps due to the lack of sleep, Fedom’s voice was more velvety than usual. “Even though we’ll send the appeals, they’ll need time to answer. And the emperor is naturally not going to sit still and wait for his own downfall.”

The significance of Gil Mephius taking Birac was huge. Not only could he be said to have most of Mephius’ western half under his control, but this city was also the only one that traded with the north. With it taken, it was clear that Mephius would waste away day by day.

Emperor Guhl Mephius would be sure to want to recapture it immediately and at all cost. He might move an even greater army than the one that had been led by Folker and the others. However, with his having both Rogue Saian, a unifying force among the warriors, and Princess Vileena, the proof of friendship with Garbera, at his side, and furthermore, with his having defeated the large army led by Folker with only a small force of his own, the emperor would be aware that the crown prince presence had increased more than ever.

“Right... Emperor Guhl will be worried about being attacked from behind by one of his allies,” Orba said, his arms still folded. “If he moves a large army, that will of course create an opening in the capital. In which case, Guhl will be hesitating.”



Guhl hesitating, however, also meant that his actions would be hard to predict. On their side too, if they waited too long, they would give the emperor's side time to organise a large force, but if they were too hasty, they would not be able to obtain adherence from the lords and retainers.

It had turned into a situation in which it was difficult for either of them to make the next move.

"It's fine," Fedom assured in an unusually confident tone. "Even if the other lords falter and hesitate, Indolph York of Kilro will certainly side with us. If he attacks the emperor from the rear just after His Majesty dispatches a large force, others will fall in line with his move. We can catch Solon naked."

Hmm – Orba answered wordlessly.

Although he was, of course, concerned about the attitude of the strangers who might align themselves as either enemies or allies, he did not have absolute faith in Fedom either. How many things was he still trying to hide from Orba? It was obvious that the real Gil Mephius had already died, and he did not doubt that Fedom had been involved in that in some way or another, but he was keeping his mouth shut on that subject.

Soon after they had taken Birac, when Orba had pressured him by saying that they should "speak frankly", Fedom had feigned ignorance while all the while being unable to look him in the eye.

This man – Orba was partly amazed: even at this point, Fedom still hoped to take back the initiative. And so, he still wanted to keep the essential points secret.

Well, it's fine – despite being caught in a constantly fluctuating situation, Fedom was a man who had polished his long plan for rebellion without ever giving up. If he realised that the real power within the plan had passed to Orba, who was supposed to be a puppet, he might lose it and betray them at the last moment. Which meant he would have to leave some of the 'fun' for later.

It will eventually become clear in Solon.

And in order to return to Solon, there was one important task that needed to be settled.

Having thus reappeared on the front stage as the crown prince, and having obtained such constant results in his first military manoeuvres, there were naturally many people who wanted to present themselves before Gil Mephius. Leading members from the various guilds, important merchants, messengers from trading partners: he had to make time to meet each one of them in person.

It's a nuisance – It was not that Orba did not think so. However, a war was not settled simply through the number of one's soldiers nor one's skill in handling swords or guns, and many things were necessary to continue to fight. Although he was aware of that, doing nothing but secluding himself alone in his office, holding meeting after meeting, and reading through documents would leave him feeling depressed.

"Pashir, how's it going?"

"What the –"

Orba had gone to the circular training ground in which individual matches were being fought throughout.

Pashir opened his eyes wide. The half-naked youths drenched in sweat also looked towards Orba in surprise.

That's...

The Iron Tiger. The one who killed Ryucown...

They say that he's now the crown prince's right-hand man.

Since war might be upon them within the next few days, there were many in the populace who were leaving Birac, while at the same time, many others flocked over from all around. Most of them were youths aspiring to be mercenaries.

Gil had accepted these novices all but unconditionally, and Pashir had made no attempt to conceal his displeasure over it. A few days earlier, he had shown up near evening-time because of that matter.

"Your Highness, may I have a moment of your time?"

Pashir had originally been put in charge of the Imperial Guards' infantry unit. Concurrent to that, he was also the captain of a platoon of elite soldiers chosen from

his and the cavalry unit. He ran around, every bit as busy as Orba.

On top of that, he was originally a sword-slave. He had wielded his sword and taken his opponents' lives simply to survive another day. Looking back on those hellish days, there had always, in a way, been one very simple rule of the wild.

The strong survived, the weak died.

They, who had once spent their days like beasts prowling in a field, were now swamped with work coming from holding positions powerful enough to influence the country.

Perhaps because they were reflecting exhaustion from work he was not used to, Pashir's eyes looked unusually wild. Once he was inside alone with the prince, he said –

“Looking after the newbies is too much for me by myself. I would like to request that some of them be distributed as mercenaries to Commander Gowen, or to Generals Saian and Lorgo.”

Orba had declared that Pashir was to shoulder the entire responsibility for taking care of the mercenaries who had newly arrived in Birac, from training them to taking command of them.

“Gowen is in charge of the mercenary unit made up from the people of Birac and from the gladiators bought from the city's gladiator companies. That gramps is an old man, so he's busy.”

“Besides, it was careless of you to hire them all unconditionally,” at times like these, Pashir did not choose his words with care. “What if spies from Solon have slipped in among them? No, there are definitely going to be some among them.”

“And that's why I've had them collected in one place without dividing them up,” Orba retorted. “It's easier to watch them this way. Try openly calling out to every single one of them who looks suspicious. Ask about where they come from, deliberately beat them hard during training, let them believe that they're distrusted. That will create an opening at the seams.”

“I’m no good for that part.”

“Me neither,” Orba laughed unintentionally. “That was Shique’s specialty.”

As soon as he had said that, the smile vanished from Orba’s face. He then said quickly,

“A prince who will need a great many followers from now on can’t afford to shut the gates tight at this point. Anyway, I’ll do something.”

It had been a few days since that conversation. Orba had put on his tiger-shaped mask and had shown up at the practice session that Pashir was personally supervising.

“Why are you here?” Pashir asked in a low voice.

“Didn’t the prince tell you he’ll do something?” Orba smoothly warded him off then stepped out in front of the young men.

“Is there anyone here who has confidence in their own skill? If you’re serviceable, His Highness will appoint you to his Imperial Guards,” he said loudly.

In terms of the fame and money to be earned, there was naturally a world of difference between being a mere mercenary and being an Imperial Guard under the crown prince’s direct supervision. The hot-blooded youths suddenly became excited.

With a wooden sword in his hand, Orba continued provocatively,

“You can use steel weapons. Doesn’t look like you could hit me.”

Paying no attention to Pashir’s scowling face, he confronted one of them with his eyes.

It was a tall man. Perhaps he had inherited the northern blood of the people of Varseal as he was fair-skinned and had soft blond hair, which was currently damp with sweat.

Leaving him to wield his steel sword, Orba focused on maintaining an even distance as they circled around.

“Go, go!”

“Beat the hero into a fit!”

The man thrust and jabbed, urged on by the cheers from his comrades. His height made him impressive. However, because of that, he swung wide. On his third attack, Orba suddenly bent to avoid it and thrust the tip of his wooden sword at the man's neck. The man's eyes rolled back and he collapsed, unconscious.

"Next."

When Orba said that, his breath completely undisturbed, a long line formed in front of him.

The second and third people met with much the same fate as the first one.

The fourth man drew as close as Orba's chest. His footwork had an element of unpredictability. Orba returned his attack with a short stroke, which he caught with his sword before quickly closing the distance between them. Simply by twisting the lower half of his body, and without seeming to put any strength into it, Orba destroyed his opponent's posture and swept a blow at his feet.

"Not too bad."

Orba surveyed his wooden sword. There was a crack running from its centre. He tossed it aside and had Pashir's men bring him a replacement.

There followed the fifth, sixth, and seventh men.

Not surprisingly, his breath had become ragged by that time and sweat had started to glisten all along his back on which the slave mark had been branded.

He had a little trouble with the eighth person.

When the ninth was about to step in front of Orba,

"That's enough." Pashir clapped his hands once.

Orba had his heart set on getting up to ten people. He looked over his shoulder,

"Don't interfere however you like."

"If you want to continue, your next opponents can't use real weapons. Otherwise, I won't allow this to go any further."

“Who are you talking to, cur?”

“Orba, even if you talk to me the same way that His Highness the prince would, the head of the Imperial Guards’ infantry is still me. You’re the one who isn’t to interfere anyway you like in my policies.”

Orba stayed silent, looking as though he had come to a sudden realization.

After that, Pashir left the training to another of the men and brought Orba to the back of the training grounds. With each step, the heat that had been controlling his body seem to dissipate. Once his sweat had completely ebbed away, it was suddenly hard for him to believe that only a few minutes earlier, steel had been raining down on him.

Tch

When he had decided to go as Orba, the Imperial Guard in the iron mask, to personally train the new recruits, it had seemed like a perfectly good idea. But at the time, he had not been planning to let his opponents use real weapons. That had been a spur-of-the-moment idea.

It had been terrifyingly sudden. His own emotions had been thrown into chaos. Nor could he think of any reason for it. And therefore, it had been all the more terrifying and exasperating.

Because he was thinking of that, as soon as it was just the two of them, Orba said, like a sulky younger brother,

“You have any complaints?”

“I’ve got something to tell you, since you’re close to His Highness.”

“What?”

“I’ll be sending bodyguards for His Highness from now on. I’m thinking there’ll always be two people by his side, day or night.”

“Who told you to do that?”

“I thought of it myself. The Prince’s person isn’t his alone,” he said with insistence.

Thinking about it, it was probably Pashir who appointed guards to the residence. Orba felt it was surprising. Even though he had never disobeyed orders before now, it was rare for Pashir to act on his own accord.

Pashir still had more to say.

“Which is why it’s a problem when you act recklessly. The crown prince is bound to have many things to think of and regret. Even so, absolutely nothing will come of it by getting injured here. The victims of that last battle will have fallen for nothing. I’m asking you to stop this time.”

“..”

Through the two slits that were the tiger’s eyes in his iron mask, Orba silently gazed at Pashir’s visibly sunburned face.

This guy – At that moment, words were entangled in complicated patterns within Orba’s mind. His earlier ‘terrifying’ feelings oddly agreed with Pashir’s words.

“That,” just as he started to speak,

“Finally found you!”

This time, it was Gilliam who came into sight. As he was the owner of a body even more muscular than Pashir’s, it felt as though a hot blast of wind had swept by the two of them.

“So you’re here, no.... so you abideth here, no that’s wrong... so this is where you were?”

“What is it?”

Even though he was thinking that the situation was dangerous, Orba could not help smiling wryly. Gilliam had not yet gotten used to the bother of having to change his behaviour and speech according to the situation.

Gilliam grinned in return.

You won’t be able to smile for much longer – he seemed to be saying.

Seeing that, Orba’s expression grew tense. *Has the capital made its move?*

But Gilliam had come with a different piece of news. In a way, it was a threat that was outside of Orba's predictions.

Princess Vileena had shown up in Birac.

PART 3

It was about seven days after the battle at Tolinea that Princess Vileena left the town of Apta at the northwest tip of Mephius.

The report of the victory had, of course, already arrived. What with their relief at having it end without their houses and fields being damaged, and the fact that Gil Mephius had overturned an unfavourable situation to achieve victory, the people were extolling him as the God of War incarnate.

“He is invincible.”

“The day he ascends as emperor, both the land and the people of Mephius will be secure.”

Similar things were being whispered all around and there were even incidents in which the overly-hasty had decorated shop fronts with hanging banners that proclaimed, 'Long live Gil Mephius, emperor of Mephius'. The town guards were, of course, unable to just let that one pass and took them down.

First among all the towns and cities in Mephius, Apta had begun to trade with the west. Western merchants were conspicuous among those coming and going along its streets. Up until recently, that would have been unthinkable. The friendship with Taúlia meant in turn that the days passed peacefully in Apta, so it was not surprising that the people were in a festive mood.

Whenever Garbera's Princess Vileena passed someone in Apta Castle, they would address their congratulations to her. While the princess accepted these with a smile – she would think to herself that *it might be best not to go out for a while*.

Her departure for Birac was also being put off.

The Princess had, of course, deeply rejoiced at the tidings of victory. In this fight, there had been nothing but causes for fear, and after Gil had left for the front, she had remained alone in her room, without eating, without speaking even with those closest to her, silently, earnestly, hoping for the prince's victory.

Even sleep had eluded her. The next morning, in the moment in which she heard the messenger report that "after capturing Folker and the enemy generals under his

command, His Imperial Highness entered Birac," she felt that her shoulders and back, which at some point had grown stiff from the tension, relaxed all at once as she gave a long sigh of relief.

The Princess was seized with the desire to jump into an airship and see for herself in Birac whether the prince and those she knew were safe. However, she deliberately quelled that feeling.

Now every day in Apta was a day of revelry, but she had heard that when the troops led by Folker had been approaching to within a stone's throw away, opinion in the town had been split down the middle. One view had held that when the time came, they should take up arms themselves and fight in support of the prince, while the other advised that if it came to the point where the fields risked being trampled and the houses burned, then they should surrender.

Surely that was also the case right now in Birac. Therefore, for the time being, she would wait until the situation over there had calmed down.

With that said, it should have been three or four days at most.

Unlike the people of Apta, the princess understood that circumstances were pressing. Perhaps even tomorrow, the great gates of Solon might be thrown open and a host of fully-armed soldiers and warhorses might march onto Birac, their weapons and armour bathed in the sunlight.

She had also thought that a summons would come from the prince by horse or by airship once things had stabilised somewhat.

I was overly-optimistic – she realised.

Three days passed... five days passed... and there was still no news from the prince.

"He'll be fully engrossed in things again," Vileena shrugged her slender shoulders. And thereupon added, "He is ever thus. Once he begins something, his surroundings are no longer reflected in his eyes. To say nothing of the likes of a foreign princess, who will long since have vanished from his mind. Ahaha," she tilted her small chin downwards and laughed.

Layla, who had still only just started to be an attendant, had a bewildered expression, but Teresia, who had known her for a long time, simply lowered her eyes to show her

agreement with her mistress.

Quickly growing tired of laughing, Vileena fixed her gaze on Teresia and said –

"Make arrangements for our departure."

Her face was as stern as that of a general ordering his men to *prepare to march*. Nor did Teresia make any objection.

She went to find General Rogue Saian, who had temporarily returned to Apta to see to the transfer of troops towards Birac, and had requested to ride on an air carrier that was transporting supplies.

"I am sorry to inconvenience you."

"In what way," Rogue laughed open-heartedly then offered advice with a serious expression. "The area east of here might well turn into a battlefield at any time. Please bear that in mind."

At heart, Rogue was an old-fashioned warrior. His feelings were strongly opposed to the thought of a woman proceeding nonchalantly to a place that might at any moment turn into the front line of a fierce battle.

It had to be said however that with regards to his future emperor, he also believed that – *His Highness Gil is a lonely person*.

He could not say how it was, but even when he was surrounded by crowds of subordinates and companions, there seemed to be a cloud hanging above Gil Mephius' head alone which was quick to cast the shadow of loneliness over him.

He had that in common with Emperor Guhl Mephius, whom Rogue had watched over since his youth. And that vision of the past was tied to bitter memories.

And so, Rogue thought that more than ever, right now – *His Highness needs a bright ray of sunshine*.

Having finished their preparations quickly, Vileena's party boarded the air carrier.

"Layla, will this be your first time in Birac?"

"Y-Yes."

Layla's complexion as she gazed out from the window of the air carrier was not good. She had been in that state since the morning.

"If you are in poor health, please stay in Apta," Vileena had urged her, but Layla herself had wanted to accompany her.

At that time, the princess from Garbera could not, of course, have understood the dark fears that Layla held in her heart.

The lord of Birac was Fedom Aulin.

His connection to Layla ran deep. Rather than a connection, it was more like a fate. After all, the two of them had been present at the scene when the crown prince was killed. Immediately afterwards, her father had hurriedly taken his family away from Solon, probably because he feared that Fedom would send assassins to seal their mouths.

She could not let him see her face. She could not be separated from the princess now.

No, in this case, rather than the princess, it would have been better to say that she did not want to be separated from Crown Prince Gil.

Just as indicated by "the scene when the crown prince was killed", Layla had witnessed Gil Mephius losing his life with her own eyes. Her own father had fired a gun at him at point-blank range. Gil's back had been convulsing and then, before long, he had stopped moving as he lay in a puddle of blood. Layla remembered the scene clearly.

And yet, Gil - *He's revived from the land of the dead.*

When she saw Gil addressing the crowd from the castle in Apta, she had felt her entire body tremble. She felt as though that man were a demon, who had revived from the land of the dead to once again call down a horrifying calamity on her and her loved ones.

And therefore, Layla could not take her eyes off of Gil.

During the entire journey, as she stared down with unseeing eyes at the rippling mountains that flowed by beneath and at the cliffs where herds of deer lived, Layla's

face was pale.

Normally at times like these, there was someone who gave him a piece or two of advice beforehand.

But that person was not there anymore.

So when he received the information that the princess was visiting from Apta, Orba deplored his own behaviour. *My head wasn't working*. He should have sent some kind of communication when he had entered Birac.

Even though he himself had asked her, *lend me your strength* when he had been reunited with the princess, he had once again neglected his fiancée.

He needed to go back to his room at once, take off the iron mask and put on the 'mask' and clothes of the crown prince.

Leaving Pashir, Orba turned towards Birac Castle. But –

"What's wrong?" Gilliam, who was walking right behind him, asked as Orba stopped walking.

That's right, there was that. Speaking of advice, Orba had already received some. He had been told over and over again that he should go and see the princess, not as the crown prince but as the Imperial Guard Orba.

And so, in the end, he went to the port with Gilliam as he was, without changing his clothes.

Of the fleet of ships that had arrived from Apta, only one of them had touched down in the exclusive landing area used by aristocrats on a hill close to the castle.

A girl disembarked from the ship, her shining hair blown around in the wind. For a moment, she opened her eyes wide at the unexpected reception.

"Orba. It's been a long time."

"Yes."

Orba bowed but did not say any further words. *Thank you for having taken the trouble*

to come all the way from Apta – He had been intending to say something like that, but he wondered if it did not sound sarcastic coming from him, and so, because of that groundless concern, he remained silent.

Vileena was not bothered by it and thanked him for saving her life in the western village, then introduced Layla whose family Orba had similarly helped out.

“Is His Highness working you hard again?”

“Yes. ...No, why?”

“Because he seems to keep you busy.”

The Princess’ words were the ones that sounded sarcastic, but her eyes suddenly turned towards the giant standing next to Orba. He was standing respectfully to attention in a posture he was not used to. Vileena gazed at him with a somewhat thoughtful look.

“Ah, Gilliam,” she said in a murmur. “I remember. You are called Gilliam.”

“Y-Yes,” Gilliam ducked his head in a sort of bow. “I’m, I’m surprised that you remembered the name of, someone like me.”

“How could I forget?” Vileena smiled with nostalgia. Truthfully, when she had heard the name while in the west, she had not remembered it, but that was unimportant right now.

Looking at the two soldiers, one in an iron mask, the other a giant, in turns, she said, “Seeing you like this has reminded me of Zaim Fortress. You rushed to help me just as I was about to be killed by General Ryucown. Orba, Gilliam, and Shique. For me, seeing the three of you working, as then, for His Highness is...”

Haven spoken that far, Vileena’s eyes flickered between Orba and Gilliam. “Where is Shique at the moment? Is he with His Highness?”

That casual question instantly caused Orba to feel the same shock as he would if he had been strongly struck on the chest. After a long pause –

“He was killed in battle.”

“What did you say?”

“Shique fought to the utmost for His Highness and lost his life.”

“Oh my,” Teresia’s voice unintentionally slipped out.

Vileena was at a loss for words. Her lips parted open, then shut.

It was only that she was blinking repeatedly. Then –

“His Highness?” The Princess’ expression was like one who had suddenly snapped out of a dream. “Where is His Highness at the moment?”

“That’s, um... I-I’ll go get him right away.”

As proof of how shaken he was, Orba referred to ‘go getting’ his master the prince. He could not understand how things had gone from Shique to suddenly talking of wanting to see the prince.

The conclusion was that the princess would call on him in his apartments in a few minutes’ time. Orba, of course, had to race back to his room. He removed his mask and, with help from his page, Dinn, he changed clothes in a mad rush.

No sooner had he done so then there was a knock. The door opened and the princess appeared.

Her expression was grim. Orba felt a chill.

“Thank you for coming. Although I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to go and meet you, Princess, as I was somewhat busy.”

“No need,” the princess said little as she shook her head.

Dinn bowed and withdrew, leaving just the two of them. The silence that followed weighed oppressively on Orba, who had expected to be on the receiving end of a rapid succession of complaints being hurled at him.

Twiddling the hilt of the sword that hung at his waist, he said, “I’ll answer before being asked,” with that preface, he then explained about his discussion with Fedom about what to do from then on. “What we need after this is to ‘wait’. To see what move Father

will make and how the generals throughout Mephius will react. We need time to determine the course of events.”

They had successfully made ‘time’ move, when it should have been stuck fast. Afterwards, Orba continued, they needed to confirm how far the ripples caused would spread and what kind of effects they would have.

As Fedom had pointed out, the emperor would not want Mephius’ centre for foreign trade to be occupied indefinitely, but if he acted forcibly this time again, he might be attacked from behind. The Emperor would first think to tighten his grasp on internal affairs. The consequences of that were something that Orba honestly did not want to think about. Although they were going to ‘wait’, there was a good chance that ‘waiting too long’ would put them at a disadvantage.

How Orba and the emperor would gauge distance and time would determine who would win and who would lose.

“You might have to spend some time chaffing from impatience. The gallant princess will probably want to kick me in the seat of the pants, but even so...”

“I heard about Shique,” the princess let drop a few words. Looking at it, her stern expression had collapsed and her eyes were filled with sorrow. More than the words themselves, that was what startled Orba and for a moment, he turned away.



“I see,” he said after some time had passed.

The small hand with which Vileena was unconsciously gripping her skirt trembled. “Your Highness and Shique were always to be seen together. It must be so painful... Forgive me, I do not know what I should say to you at a time like this.”

“Many soldiers died in that battle,” Orba went towards the window. “It wasn’t just Shique. We lost many young men who had futures before them.”

The Princess hesitantly approached him. With every step, the distance her feet covered grew greater.

For some reason, Orba felt an emotion that he could not put into words from that gesture. It was natural to extend his hand to her.

Ah – for a second, Vileena was surprised, then she placed her own hand on the one that was bridging the distance between the two of them. Orba lightly drew her to him and they stood looking out of the window together.

“...I have to build a future that will live up to those sacrifices.”

“I would like to help you. If my poor abilities can.”

Orba nodded almost imperceptibly.

At that same time, Dinn, who had finished laying things out for tea, stood paralyzed in front of the door then turned on his heels and left.

CHAPTER 2

NEDAIN

PART 1

Solon, the capital of Mephius.

Although there had been no magnificent and ceremonial departure, the populace was, of course, aware that an army led by Folker Baran had started off on its march some time earlier. It was headed towards Apta Fortress by way of Birac to go and suppress the fool that was arrogantly pretending to be Crown Prince Gil – who had been assassinated by the West – and the Generals Rogue Saian and Odyne Lorgo, who had shown signs of rebellion.

But it lost.

The Mephian host, organised by the emperor himself, had been defeated in battle against the impostor crown prince and even Birac, the centre for foreign trade, had been taken. Fedom Aulin, the lord of Birac, had whole-heartedly welcomed the crown prince and it was even said that “Birac treated it like the return of a true king.”

The people trembled.

Although the omens indicated that the fires of war might swallow the whole of Mephius, what they feared even more than that was Emperor Guhl Mephius. From their manner, it was as though they truly dreaded that the emperor’s fury might transform at any moment into dark clouds swirling over Solon from which bolts of lightning would come crashing.

Endless rumours were already being whispered throughout the city.

They said that in his unabating rage, the emperor had taken more than half of the soldiers who had escaped and had thrown them to the dragons.

They said that the emperor’s sycophantic vassal lords had presented him with a hundred slaves each and that in retaliation for having lost the battle, the emperor had personally cut off each of their heads until the temple of the Dragon Gods’ faith had

been steeped in blood.

They said that the emperor intended to soon call up Mephius' entire army, including the border garrisons, to Solon and send all of it to attack Birac.

The Emperor's behaviour had recently been tyrannical, and a terrifying image of him was firmly taking root among the people.

For them, because so many projects had been put off in favour of constructing the Dragon Gods' temple, the emperor and the Dragon Gods' faith were one and the same. They dreaded that, in the depths of the temple, where none of them were ever allowed to tread, sinister schemes were, even now, moving forward.

"What will happen from now on?" They asked each other when they met.

Fundamentally, in Apta, Birac, Solon, and the rest of Mephius, the people shared the same unfathomable fear for the future.

Just as the rumours said, Guhl Mephius was certainly enraged. Those who were gathered at the main palace all had their heads lowered, like a group of apostates fearing the wrath of a god.

However, the emperor, separated from them by a long flight of stairs, neither burst into angry words nor struck the ground before him with his crystal-ornamented staff.

"So Folker lost as well?" Facing the people who always gathered for the morning council, the emperor spoke in the same tone as if nothing had happened the previous day. "And moreover, Folker, Yuriah and Zaas are all three being held captive in Birac? Has there been any demand for ransom from the enemy, Colyne?"

"Yes. I-I mean, no, that is... not yet." Not even Colyne Isphan, the noble who was currently closest to the emperor, dared to look him full in the face.

"So they can't even assess how much the defeated generals are worth in ransom money. Even for them, that's disappointing."

He spoke dispassionately as he sat on his throne, but that in itself seemed to call down a silence as still as death within the audience chamber.

Emperor Guhl Mephius had not killed slaves or soldiers with his own hands, as was whispered in the city.

“Rogue and Odyne’s families are being detained in Solon, are they not?” Guhl asked Colyne just as he rose from the throne, exactly as though he were getting confirmation on some trivial matter.

“Y-Yes!”

“Lock them up in the dungeons of the Tower of Four Wings. The two generals will of course have been prepared for at least that much.”

“Is he serious?”

After the emperor had left the audience hall, the nobles and military men who had remained behind talked in hushed voices.

“Is His Majesty really planning to execute the families of the generals?”

“Of course not. It’s just a threat.”

“Then what if Rogue and the others don’t let themselves be intimidated by that threat?”

“Then at that point...”

They gulped. There was a silence in which each seemed to shrink into themselves.

“If only Lord Simon were here at a time like this.”

“Don’t.”

“No, it’s not too late, even now. We can talk with Lord Rodloom and ask him to write a letter to His Majesty.”

“How would we talk with him? Lord Simon is under house arrest. His estate is under watch and you can be sure that His Majesty receives reports about every person who comes or leaves from it.”

Silence once more.

The principal lords and military commanders of Mephius had naturally received a shock when Birac was seized. They were curious about the person who claimed to be the crown prince and also felt an indistinct anxiety about the future. But what prevailed above all other emotions was, unsurprisingly, fear of the emperor.

What the real feelings of the Dragon-hearted Emperor – as Guhl Mephius was called in both awe and derision – were at this time not easy to guess. Guhl had immediately hurried the reorganisation of his forces, but at the same time, he seemed concerned that if he pursued the brute force approach any further, the insurrection would spread.

As proof of his worry, after giving his order to the retainers, he summoned a certain group.

The place was a corner of the temple of the Dragon Gods' faith. The time was late at night.

There was a strange group of six. All of them had hoods drawn low over their faces. All of them were silently kneeling on one knee on the floor cut from rock. They looked for all the world like sacrifices waiting quietly for the moment when their heads were to be ceremonially severed.

All of them had arrived in Solon only a few days before. Each, however, through a different process.

This one, for example, had been serving as a mercenary in the defence forces at Idoro, but had slipped away like a deserter and had arrived in Solon seven days ago. That other one had established himself in one of the poor villages in the north that dotted the buffer zone with Zonga, living there with his family; but then, again about seven days ago, he and his family had suddenly appeared to have vanished, only for him to show up in Solon. Besides them, there were those who had been in the east until half a month ago, one working as a tool craftsman in Garbera, another as a pedlar wandering between villages in Ende.

The truth was that they were secret agents, in service to the emperor since their youth. Their main duty was to gather intelligence throughout the land and in foreign countries; and so they were sent to live and take root in those various areas. There were those among them who had families in foreign countries who had been living there for generations.

Of those, six who were particularly competent had been summoned.

Within the flickering light from a single candle, a man with a stooped back, his face also hidden by a hood, appeared before the group that crouched silently and motionlessly.

“We have received a secret letter,” he told them.

The document was unfolded under the light and six pairs of eyes converged towards it.

Steal into Birac and gather information – it read.

The scale of the military forces, the movements of the generals, confirmation of the Garberan princess’ survival, the layout of the guards, the atmosphere within the city – the list of items was endless.

They also included ones about the crown prince, Gil Mephius. They were to verify his identity of course, but also –

“If you see an opportunity, kill him.” Just as the man with the bent back had said with his viscous voice, this too was written in the letter.

In other words, an order of assassination.

“However, His Majesty’s involvement is not to be divulged. Killing him with poison is out of the question. Frame it as the deed of a loyalist distressed by the country’s internal chaos.”

Nobody said a word.

Which meant that they had not a single question or hesitation towards this difficult mission.

“Now then. You will act at the peril of your lives for His Majesty the Emperor.”

“We will.”

It was the first time that they spoke, and the six voices did so in perfect unison.

At that same moment, and also in the Dragon Gods' temple in Solon, another meeting was being held in great secrecy.

Although it was late at night, the leading members of the Dragon Gods' faith were all assembled in a room in the deepest recesses of the temple. At its centre was a crystal table.

It was only the barest of light which illuminated the faces of the old men, but when someone gave the order "Put it out," the room was plunged into darkness.

But only for an instant.

Had a new light been lit beneath the table? Innumerable pale luminous points glowed within the crystal slab. At first one, then two lit up at a leisurely pace, but the speed with which they appeared gradually increased until finally they were multiplying in a literal flash.

A starry night sky seemed to be appearing before the elders.

The same old man who had given the order to "put out" the light placed his hands on that sky and rose from his seat. He was comparatively young among the elders but everyone there looked at him with reverence.

"We are small," the old man spoke again. "Terribly small and weak existences. If they were to be compared to this sky, the strength of each individual would amount to no more than that of stars that are invisible to the eye." He pointed to a space on the long table. There, a point of light was glimmering, so faintly that you could only make it out by straining your eyes.

"However, if, for example, we can serve to guide a different, much stronger light," the old man moved his finger to another spot, where a much brighter light was shining. As the elder pressed down hard with his finger, the luminous point shook greatly, then started to move along with the finger. While leaving behind it a faint trail, it approached the other light and, perhaps because both were being illuminated, both lights shone more clearly.

The old man nimbly moved both hands and, sometimes gathering the scattered lights together, sometimes pulling them apart, he drew countless glimmering trails across

the illusionary sky.

“If we guide one, another will be caught up, and that other will pull along a great many other fates.”

There was a certain artistry to it. Whenever the old man waved a finger, the brilliance of the stars increased, whenever he pulled his finger along, the trail emitted light, constructing some kind of figure. “This is a diagram of fate. Even without nudging it from outside, because these fates are in resonance, they will eventually start to move by themselves in search of the golden mean and will build the ideal world that I imagine. Soon this world will be waxing full with of ether, which will allow us to oppose ‘that’ which plans to hold sovereignty over it.”

The crystal now shone with a blueish light so bright that it was impossible to look at it directly. The elders closed their eyes as though dazzled, or perhaps it was out of awe, as the mysterious, impossible light washed over their faces.

But –

The lights suddenly vanished. Like the flames of a row of candles, blown out in a strong breeze. Some of the stars just barely managed to resist and continue twinkling, but before long, their feeble, struggling light died out just as the others had.

In a world that had once more been plunged into darkness, as though waiting for the elders to open their eyes –

“Gil Mephius.”

The same man whispered a name that echoed eerily. “Strange. A star which should already have vanished has come and is emitting an unexpected radiance. More than unexpected. Great enough to throw into disarray the diagram of fate centred around Guhl that we had constructed for Mephius.”

“An impostor,” one of the elders said in a hoarse voice. “...He must be. Without a doubt. The crown prince of yore did not have a radiance that could affect the diagram of fate to that extent.”

“Just what have you been looking at until now?” Another interposed. “A person’s radiance can change easily. Among those that we have guided, there have been many who have similarly changed.”

“It doesn’t matter whether he is an impostor or the real thing,” yet another gravely interrupted. He looked up towards the first elder. “Let us extinguish him.”

The others followed in agreement but –

“We cannot directly intervene with those who already emit such radiance,” the old man’s words were strange. “It has already started to guide a great many other fates. Perhaps this too is the result of having moved the stars with our own hands but, no, we cannot speak of there being one single cause. If we forcefully intervene, the resonance of fates will collapse and we will have to build everything up again from scratch.”

Hatred burned clearly in the old man’s eyes that were usually like empty pits.

“When we were going to extinguish Ax, we wasted a great many stars and their surrounding trails. And the result was that it ended in failure. Thanks to that, we lost a considerable amount of influence in the west. That damnable Barbaroi, their intervention was faster than anticipated.”

“Then, could the crown prince possibly have been involved in that?”

“No. Even if it was not completely unrelated, I intend to find out at whose instigation that was. For those reasons, we cannot use ether and have to leave the crown prince’s fate to the workings of humans. ...Don’t worry, there are any number of ways of doing it.”

When the old man spoke, he once again extended his finger towards the lower edge of the table from which all the lights had died out. Lights like small grains of sands then appeared there.

“We will set our hands to guiding new destinies. These were originally people who were unnecessary to the diagram that we drew, but... there’s no help for it. We will guide them. Guide them, and then...” The old man’s tone once more returned to something reminiscent of nothingness. “We will have them kill Gil Mephius.”

PART 2

The Emperor had imprisoned the families of Generals Rogue and Odyne in the undergrounds of the tower.

It did not take long for that information to reach Birac. It was no more than a rumour, but the emperor did nothing to either deny that rumour or halt its spread. Rather, one of his goals had been for that 'rumour' to be reported in Birac.

Although this was well within predictions, Orba could not remain indifferent.

He had personally met Rogue's wife and son at their residence. He was also acquainted with Odyne's youngest daughter. He remembered how Odyne's daughter, Lannie, made fun of Rogue's son, Romus, for so often spending time at Hou Ran's side.

They were now locked up within cold stone walls. Spending each day fearing that their execution would be held the next, or the day after that. How long would twelve, thirteen-year-old children be able to endure that? No, in his present state, the emperor might really separate their young heads from the rest of their bodies.

His chest felt as though it were seething. He had never been good at simply waiting without doing anything. He wanted to seize the grip of his sword and march onto Solon Palace right this second. *The nobles and soldiers who would follow this bastard are nothing but fools* – how good it would feel to fling that directly at them.

But of course, he could not act hastily now. He bore the responsibility for a great many lives. And not only lives but also for immeasurable hopes and resolve, amongst which were those of Rogue and Odyne themselves.

The two generals came to see him together. To submit the charts of the changes they had made within their troops and to talk about the future.

Rogue had bought a number of ships through Zaj Haman, thereby increasing their war potential. They were, however, lacking in people who knew how to handle them. It was obviously not something that could be left to neophytes and mercenaries. The ships and carriers were flying every day in the skies over Birac so as to train the newcomers in his group.

Odyne had purchased some new model cannons. As well as having reinforced Birac's

battery positions, he was making its assembled militia undergo firearm drills until they were dripping with sweat.

“We gained valuable time,” they both agreed. In the atmosphere particular to that period before the outbreak of fighting, the soldiers were improving at a rate visible to the naked eye.

“A man I thought was never going to be of any use is now serving as a squadron leader.”

“Is it the same for you General Saian? For me too, ever since Tolinea, the number of my men that I seemed to have misjudged is endless.”

In front of the two of them whose faces were as firm and radiant as though they had freshly been scrubbed clean, Orba remained taciturn.

“Your Highness,” smiled Rogue. It was right after the sun had set and Dinn had lit the lamps in the room. Bathed in their light, the old general’s eyes were shining like a boy’s. “I understand your sentiments so much that it hurts. As time wears on, the people are thrown into turmoil and the country risks ruin. But it is as Your Highness told us at the beginning, what matters now is to wait.”

“Exactly,” Odyne nodded, “when country lapses into chaos, there will inevitably be victims. To risk a great fire simply to save a minority of victims would be the height of folly. When standing at one of the great junctions of history, one must always keep the whole picture in mind.”

Implicit in their allusions was the fact that their families were included among those “victims”. Orba clenched his fists tightly beneath the table.

Even if the reason for action was to prevent there being many victims, there would without fail be those who fell wounded or dead because of it. Even though he understood that, Orba’s decisions could no longer be for his sake alone.

Waiting was the only way.

Looking at the broader picture, Orba temporarily halting his advance in Birac was an effective policy. What Guhl was the most cautious of was preventing the crack within Mephius from spreading any wider, but also of the Impostor crown prince having a

personal connection to the West.

Is he trying to lure us to him by deliberately stopping there? Guhl would be sure to wonder.

For the emperor, what was more dangerous even than the recent defeat would be leaving the economic cornerstone that was Birac as it was. It not only risked causing the people to lose sympathy for the emperor as they were won over by a new hero, but also risked alienating the nobles and military from him.

As such, he would have no choice other than to be cautious. Capturing Birac would not be possible without arranging for a sufficient number of his best forces, gathering enough information about the enemy and, of course, choosing a suitable time to attack.

And so, both Orba and Guhl's lives were currently spent in a succession of war councils.

With the second coming of the crown prince and his capture of Birac, history was violently shaken. This had created a succession of ripples, both large and small, which in an instant, turned into a wave of 'change' that was poised to sweep through all of Mephius, or even the entire centre of the continent.'

But in truth, even though the ripples were like those produced by a large earthquake and were spreading wider and wider, time was unnaturally standing still. Just as Orba had feared, this was because it was difficult for both the crown prince and the emperor to guess even a single move that the other would make. And on both sides, there was also the calculation that this could not take too much time.

Advance, walk, move.

No matter how much he feigned composure when addressing the soldiers as they trained, or the people of Birac as they plied their trade, inwardly, he was incessantly repeating these words like a mantra.

Wait, advance.

And then –

About half a month after Orba had taken Birac, things finally started to budge.

Nedain in the east was a city that stood halfway between Birac and Solon, the capital. It had been built around an air carrier relay base that had been established several hundred years ago, when there had still been trade with the west. After a war with the northern city-state of Io, it had then developed into a fortress town; but now, its vitality had faded and the region was synonymous for “provincial” even in Mephius, which was known for being rustic.

A certain situation had arisen in Nedain since before the crown prince’s resuscitation in Apta. At the time of the slave revolt in Kilro, and probably because he believed that it risked arousing hot-blooded youths, the lord of Nedain, Jairus Abigoal, had visibly overreacted.

One of the slaves from a long-established merchant house had murdered his master and escaped. The slave, who then fled to one of the neighbouring villages, was still only a boy. Perhaps taking pity on his youth, the villagers had sheltered him while knowing practically nothing of his circumstances.

Jairus had dispatched an armed troop. The village, with its people and the boy still inside, was burned to the ground. The lord of Nedain was determined to avoid a repeat of Kilro by trampling any flicker of rebellion underfoot.

This however caused no little resentment.

The first to protest against the city-lord’s actions was a young aristocrat named Raymond Peacelow. He was a young man who served under Jairus and who was in charge of supervising the security and management of the surrounding villages.

Raymond had proceeded towards Solon and had revealed Jairus actions to the emperor. The Emperor of Mephius however had shown little interest in the matter. And as a result, Raymond had been captured by Jairus, taken back to Nedain and imprisoned.

At around the same time, an unexpected guest had visited Nedain. The Princess of Garbera, Vileena Owell, herself.

She had brought up the subject of Raymond whilst seated at a meal with Jairus. Even though her words were brief, the princess successfully coerced Jairus by implying that her words were in accordance with the emperor’s thoughts.

Raymond was released.

Since the young man was gentle by nature and had many opportunities to regularly come into contact with the populace, he was greatly loved by the townspeople of Nedain and by the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. Those villages had jointly organised a congratulatory banquet in his honour.

There were signs that a disturbance was once more creeping up on Nedain.

As soon as Boyce Abigoal noticed the Peacelow siblings walking along the pathway from the other direction, he and his companions came to a halt.

“Oh, well now. I haven’t seen you in quite some time, Raymond.”

Raymond and his younger sister Louise stopped. They bowed.

“Lord Boyce.”

Boyce was a well-built young man and, despite being a year younger than the twenty-six-year-old Raymond, he was a head taller. As his name indicated, he was the lord of Nedain, Jairus’, only son. His face that was glistening with sweat was full of vigour and, coupled with his powerful physique, the impression he gave was a bit like that of a wild beast. From what he explained, they seemed to be returning from a hunt.

“Lord Boyce brought down three deer,” one of his hangers-on bared his teeth as he laughed.

Behind Raymond, Louise’s expression turned sombre but, perhaps not noticing it, Boyce brought his face up close towards the siblings.

“I’m thinking of grilling the meat in the garden and eating it right away. How about you two come as well? I’ve just gotten some good liquor from one of the merchants too.”

“Thank you, but the likes of us are...”

“Right, wasn’t it that the believers of Badyne can’t eat meat?”

“No,” Raymond shook his head with a sour expression, “there is nothing that we cannot eat but we must consecrate the animal whose life we are about to take to God.

After praying morning and evening for three days, we can then eat it.”

“How stupid,” Boyce said scornfully. “Eat when you want to eat, drink when you want to drink. There’s no better happiness than that.”

“If I’m not wrong, women of the Badyne faith can only share a bed with their chosen man, right?”

“Ahaha. The god of Badyne really likes putting people in shackles. Only the sort of people that like being oppressed are fit to be his believers.”

His companions opened their mouths wide as they laughed. An angry expression flashed across Raymond’s face. But a slender white hand clasped his clenched fist from behind. Raymond just barely managed to avoid exposing his emotions by bending down his head.

Raymond came from a powerful family native to a territory that was currently in Garbera’s possession. It had fallen under Mephian control for a time, during which, the Peacelow family had obtained the status of Mephian nobles. In accordance with the customs of that region, the family had belonged to the Badyne faith for generations.

Because of that, he had often felt small and humiliated in Mephius, where the Dragon Gods faith had become the state religion. He had frequently experienced scenes like these in which he was looked down on or scorned.

“Anyway, what kind of business did you have with Father to come to the mansion today?”

“It was merely for our regular consultation.”

“That so? And here I thought for sure that Sir Raymond’s bad habit was rearing up again,” Boyce’s thick lips twisted into a smile.

“My bad habit?”

“Your habit, Sir Raymond, of going on endlessly about small issues. Last time, there was that quarrel involving that one slave brat. Who knows if you won’t kick up a fuss directly before His Majesty even now.”

Raymond remained silent.

Just the other day, Jairus Abigoal, lord of Nedain, had once again harmed his own people.

It was just after the rumour had reached them that a person claiming to be the crown prince had appeared in Apta to the southwest, and had sent a letter to the emperor in Solon. Several young men had been discussing the topic in a tavern. All of them were very drunk.

“It’s not surprising that a hero would be immortal.”

And so on.

“Defending the West really does seem like something the crown prince, who righteously honoured the pledge with Garbera, would do.”

And so on, until finally, they all reached fever pitch.

“Let’s approach Lord Jairus and ask him to definitely cooperate with the crown prince.”

“No, would the crown prince, who honours righteousness, have any kind feelings for our lord? Lord Jairus is more likely to be scared of being condemned and run away.”

They had said, laughing.

Jairus heard about it.

In his rage, he had them dragged before him. Of the five who stood in a row, their faces pale, four had fallen to their knees and had pleaded that the alcohol had run away with their tongues. Only one of them, even though the blood had also drained from his face, had openly declared –

“Your Excellency. The crown prince has righteousness on his side. Please think about the future of Mephius.”

Three days later, he was hung in Nedain’s town square. Because they had deliberately chosen to do so in the opening hour for the morning market, his corpse had been there for many of the fief’s people to see.

That was what Boyce Abigoal was bringing up.

“Were you not going to honour Father with your advice again?”

“No. I have nothing in particular to say to Lord Jairus about it. Please excuse us.” Raymond bowed again and, seeming to be pulling his sister by the hand, left Boyce’s presence.

Just as they passed one another, Boyce gaze fell on Louise’s profile. She was seventeen. Boyce’s gleaming eyes crawled from her face to her body, clinging to her like a spider’s thread.

“What’s with that, so lame,” when the two of them were still in sight, one of his hangers-on said out loud, intending to be heard.

Another of Boyce’s friends nodded empathetically, “Last time, he had a lot more to say.”

“Hah, has the bold Sir Raymond had his sharpened fangs broken off?”

Boyce himself said nothing, but his lips were curved in a scornful smile.

PART 3

That night.

To the north of Nedain there was a relatively large quarry.

It was sunk in shadows. Drinking songs carried by the wind could be heard from far away. No doubt the masons who were staying overnight were getting drunk on cheap liquor.

A person with their hood drawn down low had unexpectedly turned up there, then continued along the narrow path leading to the quarry.

“Oho, a guest?” Several masons barred the way. Walking up with tottering footsteps, they surrounded the person in the hood from both sides.

“Sorry, but this is a private party. No outsiders welcome.”

“At least bring a present. You got any booze with you?”

Since they performed heavy labour every day, they were a burly-looking bunch. The person wearing a hood however did not seem panicked and instead said something strange –

“I don’t have anything with me today. But one day we’ll share a toast in Solon.”

The drunken-seeming men promptly drew up straight.

“It’s you, Lord Raymond.”

“We were rude.”

“No,” the face that appeared when the hood was pulled back was undoubtedly that of Raymond Peacelow, “you’re being excellently thorough. It’s only if you weren’t that I’d be bothered.”

Raymond himself had decided on the exchange of passwords.

Nearly three hundred men were making merry but, when Raymond’s figure appeared in the doorway, just like the lookouts had earlier, they all stood straight to greet him.

“Everyone, at ease,” Raymond called out, but the men’s attitude remained as it was.

They wore rough, shabby clothes on their muscular bodies, and their faces were grimy and black from the sweat and dust of manual labour. But they gazed at Raymond with a fiery radiance in their eyes.

Their ages ranged between twenty and fifty years old. Their occupations were actually equally varied and only about half of them were originally masons. The remaining half were the second or third sons of craftsmen, farmers, or merchants.

One man stepped forward from among them and wordlessly took Raymond’s hand. He seemed to be somewhere in his mid-thirties. It was him however who had caused Raymond to make a certain decision.

“Lord Raymond, it was good of you to come.”

“Dolph,” Raymond spoke his name and clasped his hand firmly.

If you brought up the topic of a man named Dolph with, say, the father and son of the Abigoal family, they would undoubtedly tilt their heads in confusion, wondering who and what you were talking about. Dolph himself however held an uncommonly strong feeling towards the House of the lords of Nedain.

Hatred.

Dolph was the older brother of the young man who had recently been hung. Not only that, but his older sister had married into the village which had been set alight by the forces dispatched by Jairus Abigoal. Which meant that in a very short period of time, he had lost his sister, his brother-in-law, and his younger brother.

All at the hands of Lord Jairus Abigoal.

When the village had burned down, he had raged that “I’ll kill Jairus!” His brother had talked him out of it in tears. His younger brother, who had only just decided to get married. Of course, he too shared the agonising pain of losing their older sister, but when he clung to him, saying –

“What will those of us you’ve left behind do if we lose you now too?” Dolph had wavered. From the start, he had only had the smallest hope of being successful in his revenge.

It was at that point that Raymond, hearing about the situation, had rushed to find him.

“Please, Dolph. Endure. I am going to gallop to Solon right now. I intend to appeal directly to His Majesty about this.”

In honour of the completion of the new temple in Solon, Jairus himself also planned to go to the capital. Raymond would bring Jairus’ actions to the light under his very eyes.

“Don’t do anything hasty before I return. Have faith in me please and wait.”

Although he was young, Raymond was a noble who acted out of care for the people of the fief. When that Raymond was pleading with him with such a desperate expression, Dolph could do nothing but agree to his request.

Afterwards, Dolph’s heart was plunged into turmoil for a while as Raymond was imprisoned in punishment, but he was soon released.

And after that, it was the country that was thrown into an uproar. They had heard that there had been a battle near Apta, in the southwest, with Taúlia, and a large army brandishing spears had headed west by way of Nedain; but, just when they had been thinking that they were headed for war with Taúlia again, it turned out that these troops were going to face the impostor crown prince in Apta.

The quiet, rural town of Nedain was thrown into chaos.

Airships were sent in all directions from the town, even though it meant using what little ether they had. Raymond himself was run off his feet as he worked on intelligence gathering and plans for ensuring the people’s security.

And on top of all of that, Jairus gathered together three hundred militiamen and ordered them to man Nedain’s fortress.

Just how many of the good people of this domain do you really think would risk their lives to protect yours? He almost blurted out those words but just managed to swallow them.

It was during that time that the young man had been executed. Raymond had no time to halt it. When he had heard that the youth was Dolph’s brother, he had immediately leaped on a horse.

It was the same as when the village had been burned to the ground. By the time he had arrived at the quarry, Dolph had already rushed out. He followed him without a moment's delay. He had only just managed to catch up with him when he was already halfway to Nedain.

This time however, Dolph would not listen to him. In his hand, he was clutching a pickaxe. He raged on that he would definitely, definitely bring it down on Jairus' neck.

Raymond, who had jumped from his horse, was practically clinging to Dolph's back. No matter how many times he was shaken off, Raymond did not give up. In the hand that was not grasping the pickaxe, Dolph was gripping a small box.

He did not know what was inside. But Raymond could guess. He had heard from the gossip among Dolph's fellow workers that Dolph, who was by nature a lover of wine and women, had not gone drinking with them or gone to enjoy himself with prostitutes for several months. He had surely been saving his meagre wages in order to buy a wedding present for his little brother.

When Raymond realised that, he drew the sword that was at his waist.

"And now, are you going to kill me?" Dolph had screamed at him in tears. It was obvious from his attitude that he was prepared to resist to the bitter end, but Raymond instead grasped his hand and put the sword hilt in it. He whispered in the ear of the utterly dumbfounded Dolph –

"Kill Jairus with this sword." Raymond had repeatedly been flung to the ground and his face was covered in sweat and dirt and tears. "But I won't let go of its hilt either. We'll do it together, Dolph."

"L-Lord Raymond..."

"But not now. If we try to kill Jairus with just the two of us, we will only fail. There is no sense in that. We'll gather enough people, wait for the right time, and we will definitely drive Jairus into a corner."

At the moment when he said that, Raymond had neither a plan nor confidence in their chances of success. But those were not words that were simply meant to buy time either. At that time, Raymond very certainly made the decision to chase Jairus Abigoal out of Nedain.

And the current of the times was with them.

Needless to say, the faction led by the one who called himself Prince Gil and denounced the emperor's actions had defeated the large army that had been dispatched from the capital. The lord of Birac, Fedom Aulin, immediately sent out appeals, having clearly switched to the crown prince's side.

The effect of these was huge. With Raymond and Dolph at the centre, men who were dissatisfied with Jairus were assembled together.

"Lord Raymond, we're glad that you often come here, but has it not been noticed?"

"It's all right," Dolph had entirely become the leader of the anti-Jairus group. Raymond felt no reserve about it either. The young nobleman smiled with irony, "I was under surveillance right after being released from confinement, but the others are completely reassured by now. At the time, Jairus' son seemed to always be hunting in the nearby forest."

"Oh? Hunting."

"Even though to all appearances, they should not have the leisure to spare. Jairus has also been running around recently gathering soldiers. He seems to constantly be sending messengers to Solon."

"Then..."

"Yes. An opportunity will definitely appear soon." Raymond nodded firmly.

Excitement instantly ran through the men. So many eyes were shining brightly from the blackened faces that even Raymond felt dazzled for a moment.

Still, no matter how much energy they had piled up, they could not, of course, capture Nedain Fortress with just three hundred alone. When he saw a chance, Raymond would go to Birac where he intended to meet with the crown prince.

To ask him to dispatch troops.

At that time, the three hundred would riot within Nedain.

After he set a village alight for sheltering a single slave, and then hanged a young man

for joking around when drunk, Jairus feared a revolt in his territory. Or to be more accurate, he feared that the emperor would hear of such a thing.

Since Zaat Quark's rebellion during the Founding Festival, as well as the slaves of Kilro all rising at once, the emperor had become terrifyingly well-attuned to similar issues.

Jairus could not afford to ignore this. To prevent the fire from spreading, he would certainly use greater armed force than was necessary to beat down any men who might rise to action.

There were preparations in place for the men to escape to the stone quarry once the soldiers drew near. Jairus' men would surely pursue after them.

Raymond would guide the crown prince there. After all, Jairus' troops would look down on their opponents as being just rabble that was unused to using weapons, and so they would be helpless when faced with a surprise attack.

Separated from a great many of his men, Jairus would be as good as naked.

He could picture in his mind the scene of the crown prince entering Nedain in grand style. Beside him there would surely be his fiancée, Princess Vileena. Raymond Peacelow felt his chest grow warm. He had heard the rumour that, when he had been held captive, the one who had approached the lord of Nedain about his release was none other than the Garberan princess.

The Prince who honoured justice and the princess who had saved one such as himself. If these two people would also save Nedain, he felt that not only his and his companions' future, but also the future of all of Mephius would be bright.

"But for that, we need to maintain the utmost caution. Don't do anything hasty, Dolph."

"Of course," Dolph struck his fist against his rock-firm chest. "If it means being able to tie a rope around Jairus and Boyce's necks with my own hands, I'd even sit in a fire and wait."

Boyce Abigoal. Raymond recalled how they had passed one another by that evening.

When the village had been set alight, it was, of course, Jairus who had given the order, but it was actually his son Boyce who had carried out the action. He was a man who spent his time hunting from morning till night. He had aimed his gun at the people of

the fief just as he would at deer or wild boars, and then raised his sword to slaughter women and children.

Raymond frequently went to the villages that surrounded Nedain. Just as those who mocked it said, the town was undeniably provincial. But because of that, the people all had simple, warm characters. And of course, those living in the village that had been set alight had all been well-known to him.

Unforgivable – Raymond's sense of that towards Boyce might be even greater than that of those who had lost family members.

"What's that?" Asked Dolph when he saw Raymond hang something from the bracket that was used to hold a pine torch to the stone wall.

A flower. An artificial flower that seemed to have been made by folding thin sheets of paper.

"A charm," Raymond smiled faintly. "Louise folded it for everyone last night."

"Lady Louise did?"



When they heard the name of Raymond's younger sister, the men all crowded around the pale artificial flower.

She, just like Raymond, was very popular in the various villages. Her health was by no means robust, so she did not frequently visit the villages in person in the same way that her brother did, but her fair and unprejudiced personality was widely known among the villagers.

"Oh, it's beautiful."

"Idiot, don't touch it! It'll get broken if you touch it with your rough fingers."

"What was that!"

The atmosphere grew boisterous.

Folding paper flowers was something like an old custom within the Peacelow family. Or rather, it was a kind of tradition that was still handed down in the northern region of Garbera that had once been their territory.

When a daughter from the Peacelow House turned fifteen years old, she received a present of high-quality paper from her mother. She was to use them to fold flowers for her friends and for the people who had taken care of her, only this time as a present from herself. And lastly, with the remaining paper, she would fold herself a bouquet once her marriage had been decided.

"Oi, Molt. Don't stay in that corner and come see."

"Ah, y-yeah."

"Watch it, you're always so clumsy, you might touch it and mess it up."

The men were probably superimposing the image of the girl they would have seen no more than once or twice with the origami flower. Their vigour now was clearly different from the dazzle they had had until just moments ago, and Raymond smiled wryly at the scene.

The siblings' parents had died when Raymond was young. Their father had been killed ten years ago, in the very first battle at the start of the war with Garbera. Since the Peacelow House had originally been a Garberan family, he was concerned that they

would come under intense criticism and so he had taken the initiative of leading a troop and joining the battle.

Their mother's health collapsed when she heard of their father's death and she soon passed away. Raymond had been fifteen at the time. He succeeded as head of the household with no time to properly grieve for the loss of both his parents.

The year before last, when Louise had also reached the age of fifteen, Raymond had given her the gift of paper in their mother's place.

The flower that was now decorating the stone wall was the first one she had folded. Since it was the first, in all honesty, it was not that good. In his memory, his mother's paper flowers were much daintier and far more elaborate.

But still, this first flower that his little sister had painstakingly folded seemed to shine on its surroundings. It seemed to symbolise the present and future of the Peacelow House.

The perfect opportunity finally arose.

Jairus Abigoal would be leaving for the capital. He was probably going to plead directly for reinforcements, or perhaps a dispatch had already been decided and he was going there to organise the troops, including those for the garrison.

Boyce, who was in charge of defending Nedain in his father's place until he returned, was spending his days hunting, just as he always did.

Right – Raymond made up his mind. He would head for Birac when the sun set.

Since Nedain's garrison took it in turns to watch over the highway, he would avoid that route. There was a good chance that the River Zwimm, which ran between the two cities, would also have lookouts. He followed a detour south and galloped hard, it should take him three or four days.

His preparations for food and provisions were already complete. Raymond called together the pages and stewards of the Peacelow House.

"I will be away for a short while."

He avoided talking about his destination, but almost everyone could sense something of the situation. They all nodded with serious expressions or while shedding tears. When Raymond, the current head of the family, had been imprisoned, they had all endured the humiliation and the anxiety. None of them opposed his decision.

His sister Louise, who never spoke much, did not say anything in particular now either, as she looked at him with her large, anxious-looking eyes. But when he was finally about to depart, Louise, who seeing him off, suddenly held out her hand to him.

“Brother,” in her palm, there was a white origami. It was so small that it seemed likely to be blown away in the evening breeze. Raymond took it and tucked it in at his breast.

“Have I gotten a bit better?” Louise smiled shyly.

Raymond smiled too and shook his head. “Not there yet. You need to polish your skills much, much more before your marriage is arranged.”

When he said that, his sister blushed for a variety of reasons.

Sunset. With the dark mountain ridges behind him, Raymond was hurtling along on horseback.

Finally.

History was moving.

The future was changing.

And in that future, the people’s lives would be bright and he would find a partner for Louise and send her towards a happy married life. Raymond Peacelow was setting off as the first step towards that.

Without noticing the shadow that watched intently from behind him as he galloped away from the highway.

PART 4

Raymond passed through the gates of Birac.

He had taken short breaks several times along the way to allow his horse to rest, still he had galloped almost all night. It was now early dawn of the fourth day since he had left Nedain.

Young though he was, he could not hide his exhaustion. But when he thought of his sister and companions whom he had left in Nedain, he felt that he could not possibly lie down to sleep.

Early in the morning, he proceeded towards Lord Aulin's residence and informed the soldiers on guard at the gate of his identity. He was wondering how long he would be asked to wait but –

"I'll see him at once," the crown prince replied with an immediate meeting.

Two hours after arriving in Birac, Raymond was sitting directly across a table from Crown Prince Gil Mephius. Although the night had barely just given way to dawn, there was no trace of fatigue or sleepiness on the prince's face.

This person...

He had known it of course, but he realised it anew seeing him directly –

... is young.

There was something frankly unbelievable in the fact that this crown prince, who at a glance looked like a young boy, had accomplished so many feats of arms in so little time.

However, sitting directly opposite him and facing him head on, it was also a fact that the other had a deeply impressive presence.

Immediately after they had exchanged greetings,

"So, you who is employed by the lord of Nedain, what business do you have with me, whose head is currently wanted throughout Mephius?" Gil Mephius asked. He drew

his hand across his throat like a sword. “Spurred on by righteous indignation, have you come to ‘collect’ me all by yourself?”

“T-That is absurd...”

“Then speak.”

Having been caught up in the prince’s pace right from the start, Raymond talked about the current situation in Nedain and about Lord Jairus Abigoal’s evil deeds. Gil did not interrupt to say a single word. Finally, when they arrived at the main issue –

“I have brought you some food,” a voice came from the other side of the door.

“Come back later,” Gil started to say but then, for some reason, faltered partway. With a scowl, he altered his tone and his words –

“Please come in.”

The door opened and the figure of a girl with platinum hair appeared.

Ah – Raymond exclaimed unthinkingly. He then stood straight, in an attitude even more at respectful attention than he had when Gil Mephius had entered the room.

With Teresia, her head lady’s maid, behind her, Princess Vileena set the food from a tray onto the table. Watching the warm steam rising from it, Prince Gil asked with a sullen expression –

“Princess, why are you here?”

“I heard that even though you had not yet had breakfast, you had already begun to work, Your Highness. It is good to be enthusiastic, but pushing yourself too hard is harmful to the health. Now then, you too Sir Peacelow.”

The Princess spoke cheerfully but, since she already knew his guest’s name, it looked like she had come to warn him – *don’t do things sneakily*.

While Gil was sighing off to one side, the princess smiled and curtsied to Raymond.

“This is the first time I have the pleasure of seeing you.”

“Yes!” Raymond was still standing straight. “I have not forgotten for a moment that it was by your grace that I was saved at that time. However, I did not have the opportunity to express my gratitude to you before today. My impoliteness is...”

“But in what way?” The Princess personally added milk to the two men’s cups. “Now, please have some while it is warm.”

“I don’t think it’s really possible but, did you make it, Princess?”

“Not possible?” The Princess smiled and turned towards Gil. “What is not really possible, Your Highness?”

“N-Nothing.”

After a short breakfast, Raymond went into the main issue.

Incidentally, Princess Vileena had remained within the room. For a moment, Raymond had been worried about it, but Gil shook his head and urged him on, saying “don’t mind it.” He mostly looked resigned.

Raymond nodded and explained about the plan that was in motion in Nedain. When he gave the signal, a riot would immediately break out inside the town. Jairus would certainly use a large force to suppress it. They would lure those troops to the quarry, then with the prince’s help...

After hearing him out to the end, Gil drained the milk that was leftover in his cup and, in what looked like a gesture born from habit, waved the cup behind him to ask for a second serving. Since the one who stepped forward was the princess, for a second, his expression turned into a scowl again, but he meekly waited while she refilled it before saying –

“Interesting. If the plan works, we can take Nedain without any effort. Raymond, do you have experience with warfare?”

“I’m ashamed to say it, but no, none,” Raymond lowered his eyes. “Both my grandfather and my father were warriors born and bred, so I learned the basics, but there are not currently any soldiers serving the Peacelow House and I’m presently living at the mansion with my only family member. I was not favoured with any opportunity to achieve success on the battlefield.”

Who could say how much of the other's circumstances Gil managed to grasp thanks to what he had just said. He once more drained his cup to about three-quarters empty.

"Well, Nedain Fortress might find itself in a strategic position soon," he said off-handedly.

As for Raymond, he felt a little dizzy.

"However," Gil's expression and voice both changed, "I said it earlier, but I'm the one that Mephius' Emperor has denounced as an impostor. Why did you decided to believe me?"

The way he asked the question was like he was probing the intentions of an enemy general. Raymond felt overawed but still just managed to force his voice out.

"Of course, it is because I believe that Your Highness honours justice and..."

"That has nothing to do with anything," Gil said flatly and, for a second, Raymond averted his eyes.

"What's the matter? Say it openly."

"I-It may be presumptuous of me to say." Raymond looked at the 'crown prince' before him with neither reverence nor dread, but only with his own resolve. "I did not believe in the prince, I believed in Her Highness, the princess, who saved me. Since she is by your side, most probably... no, certainly, there can be no mistake that you are the real crown prince."

"Oh," the prince and princess exchanged glances, then, "very well. Then I'll also believe you, who believes the princess."

A messenger had arrived from Raymond. He was a soldier from Birac Fortress who was disguised as a pedlar. Dolph's hand shook when he received the letter from him.

It said that a military force would leave from Birac late that night. Two days from then, they would be waiting in watch by the highway, which was when they were to riot and lure Jairus' soldiers away.

It was finally time to put their plan into action, in other words, it was time to snatch Nedain out of the hands of a foolish usurper; and for Dolph, it was time to accomplish the revenge that he been waiting for for so long.

At midnight of the next day, all of the companions gathered at the quarry. After finishing their final preparations there, they would disperse throughout Nedain in units of fifty men. They would cause disturbances, and set fire to empty houses and to stores belonging to merchants who acted as purveyors to the Abigoal House. Once the troops were sent out, they would once again assemble at the quarry. That was the planned sequence of events.

Dolph treated everyone to the wine that he had been keeping back for the occasion.

“Finally,” everyone said and clapped Dolph on the shoulder.

He drank while nodding back. He had always had a strong head for alcohol, but that night in particular, it did not get him drunk.

Weapons that they had scraped together from all over were leaning in a row within the man-made cave. There were only a few spears and swords, with the rest being pickaxes or hoes at best. Even so, in Dolph’s eyes, they represented unsurpassed strength and the symbol of victory.

There was also a single artificial flower decorating the wall. If his little brother’s wedding had been held as planned, the bride would surely have worn similar flowers in her hair.

With his wine in one hand, Dolph wept.

At around the same time, a man who was entirely concealed beneath his hooded cloak swaggered into sight at the entrance of a path that led straight to the quarry. The figures of other men in similar attire followed behind him.

The men on lookout, just as they had when they stopped Raymond, pretended to be drunk and went up to them.

“Yo, newcomers? Brought any booze with you?”

It had been arranged that about thirty men who endorsed their goals would be joining them that evening. That was an achievement which had been accomplished by Molt, a man who had participated in the plan from the first. He was originally a farmer and was not a man who usually stood out, so everyone had been astonished and had praised him tremendously for his feat on the previous evening.

That group, led by Molt, had arrived.

“We’ll drink a toast in Solon –”

Upon hearing the password, the man on watch felt reassured and started to turn back to go and inform his comrades in the quarry.

And in that second, a sword was drawn from beneath the cloak.

“– but did you think you’d be sharing it?”

The man who had been on watch fell without a sound. The blood-spattered cloak was flung aside.

“Go!”

The man in the lead yelled, brandishing his sword, and the soldiers flooded into the quarry, their rough voices reverberating.

Soon there was the uninterrupted sound of gunshots.

Screams that would have pinned a normal man to the spot if he had heard them welled up one after another. Caught in a surprise attack, ordinary people were no possible match against that troop from Nedain’s defence forces under Boyce Abigoal’s command.

The artificial cave was quickly filled with the corpses of those who had taken a bullet or a blow to the head from an axe or a sword.

“F-Fuckers.”

Wielding a sword, Dolph put up a desperate resistance, but a soldier’s sword sent both his weapon and his wrist flying through the air.

“Guah!” With a cry of pain that sounded like that of a crushed frog, Dolph crouched to the ground in pain. The blood spraying from his severed wrist stained the flower on the wall a dark red, and the secret massacre continued.

“Shouldn’t it soon be starting?”

Boyce Abigoal muttered as he looked up at the night sky filled with twinkling stars. He had not gone to the quarry. What currently lay in front of his eyes was the Peacelow mansion.

“Raymond is a fool,” Boyce’s clean-cut features wore a vicious smile.

For a while after he had been released, they had deliberately had soldiers keep him under conspicuous surveillance. But as soon as those soldiers had been removed, Raymond became completely careless. Immediately after Dolph’s brother was executed, they had once again reinforced their watch on Raymond to see if he was not getting any strange ideas again.

And Raymond had hatched a plan, just as they had thought – or rather, one that went far beyond what they had expected.

But this is a good chance.

Boyce had persuaded his father to make use of Raymond’s plot and to make preparations to ambush the soldiers who would be sent from Birac. Jairus going to Solon was certainly to formally request reinforcements, but it also served the purpose of giving Raymond free rein.

If I can defeat the impostor crown prince before reinforcements arrive from Solon, His Majesty’s evaluation of the Abigoal House would all at once rise exponentially. He thought about how he might even receive an exceptional promotion and be made one of the twelve generals in place of Folker or Yuriah who had failed to subjugate the impostor.

That ambition dyed his heart completely black.

He was a man who had not one ounce of compassion towards those commoners. That was something he had inherited from his father. His heart did not feel so much as a

twinge of pain at knowing that they were deliberately staging a rebellion and, furthermore, that their plan involved slaughtering his father and him.

Quite the opposite, he had won over the man called Molt in order to perfect the plan. Because his mother was ill, Molt urgently needed money. Boyce had paid from his own pocket to call in a doctor from Solon and had made the farmer into his spy.

By now, the quarry would have become a one-sided hunting ground. The hunt-loving Boyce did feel like wanting to go there, but he had something else to do.

Right.

“Let’s go,” he called out to the line of fully-armed soldiers then forcibly intruded into the Peacelow house.

By that time, a minor ruckus had broken out inside the mansion.

However, it was not because they had been able to predict the surprise attack. Rather, just in case the worse happened, Raymond had taken in about a dozen young children belonging to those who were involved in the rebellion. The children of course knew nothing about the situation. They had simply been told that it was because their fathers had to work overnight.

At first, they had been as quiet as lambs, but the children were between five and ten-years-old, and were at the ages when they most wanted to play. Even though all of them seemed to fall asleep as Louise read to them by their bedside, they were all over-excited by the change of environment and by seeing such a large mansion for the first time. Waking up again at midnight, they immediately started playing tag and hide-and-seek.

And into that –

“Where’s Raymond?” Boyce had violently come trampling into the mansion.

And of course, because men in helmets and armour had appeared, the children had run screaming.

“W-What do you want? At this hour...” A long-serving steward to the Peacelow House went to intercept them but Boyce treated him like nothing but a pain and swept him aside with a swing of his brawny arm.

“Search for Raymond! I’ll see that rebel hanged.” Shouting angrily, he smashed his way into one room after another, knocking over tables and slicing at pillars.

Boyce was, of course, well-aware that Raymond was not there.

He went up to the second floor and kicked open a door. The children had been lying hidden. Like kindling set alight, they all started crying at once.

“Lord Boyce, this is – outrageous.” Louise rushed over, her face pale.

Boyce’s eyes gleamed ferociously as turned towards her. He had had his sights on her for a long time. And especially when they had passed by each other near the Abigoal mansion recently: he could not forget how her limbs had seemed to give off heat as she had slipped quickly past him.

Already at the time, he had expected that this would happen. The ache of lust swelled until it was unbearable.

“Where is your brother, Raymond? Why isn’t he at home?”

Boyce heard her gulp. Louise’s large eyes darted around restlessly.

“M-My brother has gone to one of the neighbouring villages. There was an emergency and...”

“Hmph, don’t pretend ignorance. Did you think I didn’t know? What do you think is happening right now to the fools who gathered at the quarry?”

Louise looked startled, then her entire body started to tremble.

“You... Y-You... You can’t have...”

“Judging by your reaction, it looks like you also knew about the plan to rebel. Come! I’ll examine you in person.”

Seizing her slender arms that looked as though they might break from it, Boyce dragged Louise to an empty room.

CHAPTER 3

OLD BLOOD

PART 1

The force that had left from Birac numbered about seven hundred. Three hundred infantry, a hundred and fifty cavalry. There were fifty dragoons on the fleet-footed, small-sized Tengo dragons, and the remaining two hundred were riflemen.

The one in command was the general of the Silver Axe Division, Odyne Lorgo.

Gilliam was part of a platoon of infantrymen.

Just in case, General Rogue also had troops organised and on standby inside and outside of Birac.

Orba himself, after watching his troops leave in the dead of night, was not in his bedroom but in his office. He could not command from the front lines in every battle from now on. Thinking of the ‘afterwards’, of the battles that would lead to victory against the Emperor, he would need to get used to sitting alone in his office like this, motionless and with his arms crossed.

Afterwards... afterwards?

A map was spread out on the office desk but Orba’s eyes had been shut for a while now. He had still not found a clear answer to the challenge that Folker Baran had thrust forward.

Inside the room, along with Orba, were three guards that Pashir had forcibly pushed onto him.

Princess Vileena, who had presented herself during the conversation with Raymond, had not afterwards interfered with anything to do with the battle.

“I leave this to you, Prince.” He had been hearing words to that effect earlier.

Will we take Nedain today? If we take it, what will come ‘afterwards’? The remaining

major cities are Solon, Kilro and Idoro. If what Fedom says is true, Kilro's lord, Indolph, will support us. In that case, Emperor Guhl will definitely send for the entire army to gather in Solon.

Actually, they had received information that the troops of the twelve generals, scattered throughout the country, were already moving along the highways.

Solon being the capital city, military ships and army corps other than the one's assigned to defend it were not originally allowed to enter. Which meant that they intended to put the entire army to use in protecting the capital.

Well, whatever.

Orba opened his eyes and stopped thinking about the far-off future. Outside the window, it was pitch black. The wind seemed to have risen since earlier.

The seven hundred troops led by Odyne were marching through that wind.

Since the bridge over the River Zwimm, which separated Birac from Nedain, would naturally be under watch, they did what Raymond had done when he was coming to Birac and travelled north while keeping an eye on the highways.

Raymond was leading the way. Just like a fully-fledged warrior, a sword was hanging at his waist and he was carrying a gun on his back. And of course, his sister's paper flower was an unobtrusive splash of white decorating his breast.

They marched while sending scouts to investigate their surroundings and check that there were no soldiers lying in ambush along the highway. Three times they hailed the sunrise.

When there was less than half a day to the appointed time, the soldiers on guard had vanished from along the road.

Scouts disguised as pedlars went flying to the relay station towns to gather information; there they heard rumors of some kind of disturbance within the town, and that the soldiers had hurriedly been called back. Upon receiving that news, Odyne and Raymond exchanged looks on horseback.

"Right!"

Odyne set his resolve, crossed along the highway and left it when they were at the north of Nedain.

The sun set once more.

They arrived at the quarry less than an hour afterwards. Odyne halted his warhorse and sent three riders in reconnaissance.

They soon returned and reported that there were many lights around the quarry.

The Abigoal troops, no doubt. They had succeeded in luring them out, just as planned.

Sitting on horseback, Raymond could feel his blood simmer and seethe. He wondered if this was what it was like, the atmosphere on the battlefield. He had no experience of war itself but he felt as though if he abandoned his consciousness to the torrent of blood currently coursing throughout his entire body, he would be able to hunt the heads of ten, or even a hundred enemy soldiers.

Odyne gave the order to advance once more.

He had the riflemen go ahead so that they could fire a first volley. The enemy lights would make good targets. After that round of shooting, there would be no more need for caution. They would close the distance in one swoop and descend upon the enemy from the rear.

Raymond realised that he was unsheathing his sword without even being aware that he was doing so. Actually, for the past two hours or more, he had been grasping the hilt so strongly it hurt. Because his tension was at its height.

Boyce, you bastard, are you somewhere within this net?

He believed that he must be. If possible, he wanted to strike him down with his own hands.

For Raymond, who had lived a life unrelated to warfare, it was a dangerous thing to believe that victory was already theirs.

He calmly whipped his horse and drove it forward.

At that moment, a furious peel of thunder rolled overhead. Or at least, that was the

illusion that assailed Raymond, so violent was what happened.

The thunder rolled, and rolled, and with each thunderbolt, soldiers were shaken off their horses. The previous quiet was utterly transformed, and the surroundings were filled with blood, the neighing of horses, and the bellows of soldiers.

Riflemen had been lying concealed in the forest to their left. Because their attention had been focused on the lights in front of them, they had completely failed to notice their presence. Odyne's side, which should have been the one launching a surprise attack, was suddenly caught in a fusillade.

The corpse of a cavalryman collapsed towards Raymond. A bullet had pierced through his head and, seeing his tongue hang loosely from his mouth, Raymond's mind went blank. He shook him off in a panic and the soldier fell from his horse. Because his foot was caught in the stirrup, the body was dragged along as the horse broke into a run.

In that same interval, bullets rattled and more soldiers fell.

When he wondered whether the thunder had finally stopped, this time it was from in front of them that voices echoed.

A group of cavalrymen led by Boyce Abigoal.

The riflemen that Odyne had sent ahead collapsed without any resistance.

"General!"

Gilliam, bending down, did not need to urge him.

"Retreat, retreat, retreat!" From horseback, Odyne repeatedly yelled the same word.

One after another, the horses turned around and galloped back along the way they had come. For a moment, Raymond was almost left behind.

"What are you doing? This way, hurry!"

Gilliam, who had been at the end of the column, rushed over and forcibly led him away. Raymond followed him, all but unconscious. Sweat, tears, and mucus flowed across his entire face. Within his narrow chest, his heart was drumming so fast that it might burst out at any moment.

He was already far away from that warrior-like state of mind in which he had believed that he could defeat any number of enemies. Now, he just wanted to flee into a silence with neither gunshots nor war cries.

“Are you there, Raymond?” Boyce’s voice sounded like it was just behind him. “You escaping, you coward? I’ve got your little sister.”

It would be a long time before Raymond would be able to decide whether that was an auditory hallucination born of fear or a real voice.

Odyne’s troops fled for dear life along the road to Birac. Among the infantrymen, some deliberately chose to stop and fight so as to halt their pursuers. Were the screams that echoed at Raymond’s back their shouts as they released fire, or were they their death throes?

It was an utter rout.

They ran south of Nedain for several dozen kilometres. They stopped once on the banks of the Zwimm. They had somehow managed to shake off pursuit, but many had fallen by the wayside. Now, less than half of them remained.

“We need to send a messenger to His Highness,” said Odyne as he was organising formation.

Raymond volunteered.

Although he had managed to free himself from the panic that had gripped him during their escape, with the return of sanity, Raymond felt as though he were being strangled by bitter regrets and self-condemnation.

I was under suspicion.

He had tried to act with the utmost caution. But because he was not used to these kinds of things, he must surely have committed any number of serious mistakes. He had fallen into the enemy trap, laid right before his nose.

For a brief while, Odyne stared into Raymond’s eyes. The general’s face was plastered in mud and clotted blood.

“Alright, go,” he gave his permission in only few words.

Raymond set his expression firmly and once again galloped on horseback towards Birac.

Three days later, he was kneeling before Gil and reporting their defeat.

“I am deeply sorry. Because of my incompetence...”

The dam that had been holding back his feelings burst. Teardrops fell one after another onto the back of his hands which were pressed against the floor. Most of the labourers who were supposed to stage the uprising had probably lost their lives. No, perhaps they had all been massacred. Moreover –

“My estate will surely also have been attacked. There were children that we were looking after there. What’s happened to them? M-My sister, Louise, too... what’s happened to her? Boyce has been infatuated with her for a long time now...”

He continued helplessly prattling on to the prince. Louise was a follower of the Badyne faith in which suicide was prohibited. He did not know whether that was lucky or unlucky, considering the calamity which must have befallen her. And anyway, women of the Badyne faith were obliged to marry the one they had given their chastity to. Violently assaulted, torn between doctrine and despair, how could he begin to imagine his little sister’s suffering?

Vileena was also present and listened with a sorrowful expression to his tearful reminiscences.

“Y-Your Highness,” Raymond Peacelow clung to Gil’s cloak, “Please lend me two hundred, no, even just a hundred soldiers. In exchange for my life, I will definitely, definitely show you how I’ll kill Jairus and Boye. Your Highness, please!”

“Your Highness!” Vileena cried, momentarily startled.

Gil seemed to stoop for a second, grabbed Raymond by the nape of his neck and yanked him up. Then he hit him hard across the side of the face. Raymond tumble to the office’s floor.

Gil walked up to him, almost trampling on his head.

“If I assign soldiers to you, those hundred or two hundred men will die in vain.

“Y-Your Highness...”

“Do you think that this defeat is your responsibility? Don’t be so full of yourself. I made the decision. And I let the soldiers die helplessly.”

“ ... ”

“Call Rogue,” Orba ordered the page to summon Rogue Saian.

After quickly explaining the situation, all he asked was, “Can you leave?”

“Aye,” the veteran general clicked his heels together. His preparations were set so that they were ready for whenever the order came to head for the front.

“The enemy only consisted of the Abigoal House’s troops, which means that reinforcements haven’t arrived from Solon yet. Leave at once and join up with Odyne. Subjugate the soldiers posted along the highway.”

“Aye.”

“But if the enemy draws back into Nedain city, avoid pursuing after them. Set up formation in the surrounding area. As to where...” Orba pointed to a place on the map spread out on the table. “The cannons and airships go by carrier, the soldiers over land.”

This defeat was naturally a hard blow for Orba. He had, from the start, been walking the path of warfare because he detested those in power and hated tyrants. He felt nothing but seething anger towards Jairus and Boyce. And because of that, it was necessary to make his second move calmly and accurately.

To simply accept defeat – that would be a disgrace for the crown prince’s army. They risked losing in one go the momentum that had seized Birac and it would be bad if the surroundings heard about it. It would influence the attitude of the lords and generals. There was absolutely no sense in wasting time now.

“Raymond.”

“A-Aye.”

Raymond, who had still been stretched out on the floor just as when he had been hit,

hurriedly scrambled to his knees.

“Accompany General Rogue. You’re familiar with the area. Guide them to set up camp.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Since Jairus knew about the insurrection, the villages might also have come to harm. Rogue, when defending the villages, try to add to our forces by encouraging the people to join. If it goes well, we might be able to threaten Jairus from within Nedain as well.”

Rogue bowed his head deeply.

In any case, it was probably widely known in Solon and Nedain that the crown prince had narrowed down his target to that city. It would have an effect. The significance would be especially huge for the people who had been enduring Jairus’ oppression.

Without wasting any time, Rogue Saian departed with five hundred soldiers and two air carriers loaded with supplies.

Around the same time, Boyce Abigoal, greatly puffed up at having personally driven away the army of the Impostor Crown Prince – the same which had seized Birac – started raiding the area’s villages as violently as though they had been an enemy nation, all in the name of ‘hunting the remnants’ of the insurrection.

He would come up with some pretext to snatch away money and goods, then murder the men and rape the women. As far as Boyce was concerned, there was no need to concern himself over the Nedain territory anymore. Since a nomination to the twelve generals awaited him in the near future.

And it was for that reason that he was in a village barn and almost leapt out of his skin when Rogue and Odyne’s combined military forces started advancing to the roar of cannon fire.

“What are the lookouts doing?” He yelled while separating himself from the girl he had just been pinning down, but it was already too late.

Compared to Raymond, who frequently visited the villages and who was thoroughly acquainted with the local topography, the arrangement of guards that Boyce had spread out was full of holes. And of course, Rogue and Odyne far surpassed him in leading soldiers.

There was some fighting but it was a completely hopeless situation and, in the end, Boyce Abigoal had no choice but to flee to Nedain without even having the time to straighten his clothes.

And just as Orba had predicted, the effect on the villages surrounding the city was huge. They gathered about five hundred young men who volunteered “to join as a soldier”.

This was not only because of their resentment against Jairus and Boyce. It was because they feared that if the Abigoal family was not driven from the territory, every village in the area would be set alight.

Afterwards, following Gil’s orders, Rogue and Odyne set up camp at a location some thirty kilometres west of Nedain.

Raymond Peacelow guided the two generals through the area and, putting his knowledge of the terrain to good use, recommended where to deploy their soldiers. One day, at dusk, he and a few soldiers headed for the northern quarry.

The corpses had cruelly been left scattered around. Dolph’s was among them. His eyes were open wide, as though in regret.

Raymond wept uncontrollably as he buried them.

When he afterwards went into the man-made cave where the labourers had been staying, he noticed the artificial flower that was still fastened to the wall. Although it should have been glimmering a gentle white, it was steeped in the colour of dark red blood.

Raymond plucked it from the wall and, along with the one which had been decorating his breast, he gently laid them down at the top of the hill on which they had all been buried.

I swear.

Raymond murmured within his heart. He knew that if he opened his mouth now, all that would escape from it would be cowardly weeping.

Right now, all I can offer you are paper flowers, but I will, without fail, bring you the heads of the Abigoal father and son, Jairus and Boyce. Without fail.

PART 2

Reinforcements a thousand strong were hurrying from Solon to Nedain when, as though crossing them along the way, the results of the first battle in there reached the capital the emperor decided to follow up by sending a further one thousand five hundred soldiers. Now that things had come to this, Guhl Mephius also realised that 'time' was finally moving again.

However, unlike the trade-rich Birac, Nedain did not have enough surplus to provide food to a large armed force. Naturally, a large number of supplies also had to be transported, and for that, time and money was needed.

In terms of not having enough surplus, Solon had the same issue. In order to consolidate its defensive line, troops from all over the country were amassing in the capital. For now, everything was still fine, but would they really be able to put up the soldiers for several months now that they had lost Birac, the linchpin of the economy?

So even though 'time' had started to move, it was still inevitable for him to be hoping for an early decisive battle.

Maybe –

The people, military, and nobles of Mephius all surreptitiously gossiped about the same thing –

Maybe His Majesty Emperor Guhl will personally take command in this coming battle and head towards Nedain?

The troops in Nedain would soon be increased, at which point the crown prince's side would also start amassing the troops that it had stationed at Aptā and Birac.

In other words –

Nedain, mocked as a rural backwater, would be the stage of the final battle in a civil war which had begun in a way that no one could have imagined.

Immediately after Jairus Abigoal had returned to Nedain with his troop of

reinforcements, Emperor Guhl Mephius finalized his decision.

From now on, they would need to launch large-scale military manoeuvres. And for that, it was necessary to first ensure safety at the rear. The 'rear' in this case was not their neighbouring countries, Garbera and Ende, but those who should have been Mephius' trustworthy vassals and generals. In order to prevent any further dissension, Guhl had decided to clamp down on the internal situation.

"Cancel all scheduled gladiator fights at Solon's central arena tomorrow. The Saian and Lorgo families are to be hauled there and executed," he ordered.

The arena would be opened free of charge and all the nobles and soldiers currently in Solon, and did not have urgent military matters to see to, would be obliged to attend.

It would serve as an example to others.

Even though they had expected this to come sooner or later, everyone was shaken.

Rogue was, needless to say, a long-serving general while Odyne was widely known as a strict but capable officer. They were loved by many. Moreover, their respective son and daughter had only just gone through the ceremony for coming of age.

"I saw it with my own eyes."

In a dingy tavern at the end of a tortuous and unpaved road, a plump man sat, his shoulders quivering. The man had a store near an avenue lined with the mansions of nobles and military officers.

What he had seen was how, soon after the army of the Impostor Crown Prince had taken Birac, the families of Rogue Saian and Odyne Lorgo had been dragged from their residences and led away by soldiers.

"General Lorgo's daughter was so pale it looked like she might collapse at any moment. Because of that, General Saian's even younger son was shouting encouragements to her. 'It's alright, the Heavens know that our fathers have done nothing to be ashamed of, so it's alright, they'll definitely come and save us', he said..."

Rogue Saian's son, Romus, and Odyne Lorgo's second daughter, Lannie, had both taken part in the old ceremony of riding a dragon's back at that year's Founding Festival, so the townspeople knew their names and faces.

“I thought they’d only been arrested as a warning.”

“They can’t really be going to execute them...”

“Nah, won’t the crown prince come racing up at the last minute. He’s like the main character in a heroic tale, so I’m sure he’ll create a miracle this time too.”

“Idiot, don’t talk without thinking. Do you want to be executed as well?”

“And in the first place, it’s all because of that scoundrel who calls himself the crown prince that the generals’ fates have veered off course.”

The liquor flowed but the guests’ faces remained gloomy.

That night, the same scene and the same conversation were playing out throughout Mephius. Not only among the people but also among the chief retainers serving the imperial family. Although they avoided gathering or dining together as much as possible. Because if they did, they might receive unwanted enquiries from the emperor about secretly gathering and sneakily plotting.

Not a single noble or officer had appealed to the emperor to halt the executions. There had, however, been an incident in which long-time servants of both families had thronged before the palace gates in tears, but they had quickly been sent away by the guards.

It turned into a long night for many of those living in Solon.

Including for Simon Rodloom.

He was the emperor’s longest-serving retainer and was currently confined to his residence, accused of having remonstrated His Majesty about the crown prince when the latter was ‘still alive’.

The inside of the mansion was as silent as a grave.

Which might seem perfectly natural as it was the dead of night, but there was no hint of human presence.

Simon was alone at his desk in his study, reading quietly. His only light was a candle placed near him.

He continued reading in silence for a long time, before finally giving a single sigh and closing his book. Looking behind him, there was a pile of other books.

They were all the ones that he had been interested in but had never had time to read until now, only instructing his pages to collect them for him.

He had read them all now.

Simon stood up from his chair and stretched. He went to stand near the window and looked up at the night sky. Judging by the stars, he guessed that there was another three hours until dawn.

It was a long night.

Although he appeared to be fully concentrated on chasing the words on the page, intrusive thoughts tended to pop into his head one after another, hindering his reading and difficult to drive away.

I've still got a long way to go – every time it happened, he reflected on his own immaturity. Because of that, he had found it surprisingly difficult to finish the last three books.

Simon left the side of the window and returned to the middle of the room.

“Well then,” murmuring absentmindedly, he picked up the candle from the desk.

And tilted it across the top of the pile of books. He brought it closer and closer, without paying any attention to how the melted wax was dripping down.

He did the same with every one of the heaps of books piled throughout the room.

Finally, he returned to the centre of the room and nonchalantly tossed the candlestick to the floor.

He closed his eyes.

Acrid smoke filled his mouth and nostrils.

Even with his eyelids closed, the light of the fire intruded on his retinas.

When this moment came, what would he think, what would he feel? Simon had been wondering about that for a long time. It was an interesting question.

But now that the time had finally arrived, not a single word formed in his mind.

Simon smiled unintentionally. There had been so much turmoil and hesitation, so much reminiscing and dredging up of what seemed like every one of his memories between the time when he had formulated this plan and today. Perhaps he had already used up all of his words somewhere along that way.

Except...

I would have liked to see him.

A thought suddenly came to his mind.

The Gil Mephius of rumours.

The crown prince who now stood at a height, and with power great enough, to cross weapons with the current emperor, Guhl Mephius.

The world called him an impostor. They said that Rogue and Odyne simply craved power and had set up a different person who happened to look like the prince so that they could rebel.

But if he had to say... Gil had started to behave like a different person long ago, when he was 'still alive'.

One only had to think about how he had saved the princess in Seirin Valley and slain Ryucown at Zaim Fortress, about how he had put down Zaat's rebellion in Solon before it even happened, or again about the time when he had gone to Apta and repelled a surprise attack from the Taúlian army.

The same Crown Prince who had been mocked as a 'fool' not only by his father but also by the retainers.

It was not that Simon had not also found it strange. Compared to the other retainers, he had been somewhat closer to the prince, since he had been acting as his guardian. For that reason alone, Simon should have been having serious misgivings, yet he had solved all of his doubts with only a few words.

He resembles him.

More than the prince changing, it seemed to Simon that day by day, he was becoming more like a certain someone. In which case, he reasoned, it was normal since they were father and son.

When he had heard that Gil, who was supposed to be dead, was actually alive and was fighting against the emperor, he had simply thought that – ***You** would probably have done the same thing.*

In other words, when he was young and still the crown prince, and if his father had behaved like the current emperor was now, wouldn't Guhl Mephius also have led the warhorses to fight against him? Simon Rodloom believed he would have.

And because of that, right now, he felt a strong desire to see Gil Mephius one more time.

And if that wish were to be granted, he thought that he would want to serve and support that Crown Prince Gil. It would feel as though the ideal nation, the ideal future, that he and his friend used to talk of together throughout the night were there before him.

But –

Simon did not have that right. Or at least, he himself did not believe that he did.

He had not been able to support his friend.

As time had passed and they had aged, had it not perhaps been he himself who had first abandoned the ideals of their youth?

If and when Gil Mephius brought about a new future for Mephius, there would be no role for him in that future. If the old was going to be defeated, better to leave by oneself.

And a new future will start to be spun, rising from the corpses of the defeated and the ashes of burned down palaces.

Simon remembered how just the other day, the Garberan princess had come to visit this room which was now filled with smoke and heat.

Gil and Vileena.

From the budding signs, both might be in love with the one before them.

In which case, there's nothing more.

There was nothing more that he needed to think about, hope for, or worry about.

Simon's shoulders relaxed.

In that moment, it was as though he could feel the wind in the wilderness.

Oh!

Although he had believed that there was no longer anything left for him to look back on again, right now, Simon was being buffeted by a strong wind as he galloped his cherished horse through a barren ravine.

Mephius had very few wild horses. There were only narrow strips of land in which emaciated horses could graze, so Simon was proud of his mount which he had only just bought from Garbera.

He remembered that that childhood acquaintance of his, who was likewise riding beside him, had been envious of it.

"Sell it to me, Simon."

"Hmm, what to do..."

"Not just for money. For the daughter of the Evee House that you're so infatuated with. Shall I write a letter on your behalf, since you're so incompetent with a pen? No, wait, I can just use the imperial family's authority to order your marriage."

"They're already rumours of how you're extending your evil influence."

"Don't be stupid."

"Oh, look over there. Do you see that rocky mountain like the horn of a dragon on this side of the ravine? If you can get there faster than me, I'll think about it."

“I want your horse for its speed. So aren’t you getting the order wrong?”

“You never know till you try. Well then, let’s go!”

“Wait, you insolent cur. You’d better prepare yourself because when I become emperor, I’ll have you locked up somewhere where the light doesn’t shine. Dammit, wait.”

The two of them galloped on, laughing.

In the present, his eyes shut, Simon Rodloom was also laughing. He opened his mouth a little too wide and smoke got in, making him cough violently.

But even so, Simon continued to laugh.

Early the following morning, Guhl Mephius suddenly sat bolt upright in his bed.

These past few days, the emperor had been sleeping lightly. He had barely gone to sleep when he was already getting up and heading for his study or his office. Because of that, those who served him closely all tended to be sleep-deprived.

Recently, he had not allowed Empress Melissa to enter his room either.

All alone, Guhl wiped away his night’s sweat with a somewhat dazed look on his face. Perhaps he had a premonition.

The emperor had soon changed his clothes and left the room, whereupon he noticed that the attendant who was already there waiting for him looked pale.

“What?” Guhl asked without any preliminary. “What’s happened?”

“Y-Your Majesty. We have been contacted by the soldiers from the capital’s guards. T-There has been a fire at the Rodloom mansion.”

“What?”

The emperor’s always glaring eyes became even more ferocious than usual, just as though the attendant he was staring at was a messenger from the underworld come

to bring him notice of his own death.

“And Simon?”

“Although the soldiers on lookout raced to the rescue as soon as they noticed... They only found him after the fire had been extinguished.” He paused and visibly gulped, then continued with his head lowered. “He... He had already p-passed away.”

Guhl stayed silent for a while.

The attendant continued to talk tearfully. Recently, Simon had frequently made merry with the servants at his residence until late into the night. When a soldier on guard, alerted by the noise, had peered suspiciously through the window, he had met Simon’s eye. “It’s only at this age that I’m learning to appreciate alcohol,” he had said, laughing while a little shame-faced.

For as long as Guhl had known him, Simon had practically been a teetotaller. Yet last night, Simon had gotten thoroughly drunk and had flown into a rage against his servants. “Get out. Don’t let me see you again!” He had screamed and evicted them from the house.

Although they were confused by the change in their master, the servants thought that he was simply not used to indulging in alcohol and that he would be back to the usual Lord Simon by tomorrow morning, so they had left for the time being.

And then came the fire.

Simon had probably mishandled fire while drunk.

“Idiot.” After a long silence, the emperor shook his head. His lips twisted into an eerie, scornful smile. “No matter how old he’s gotten, that’s not like Simon. Is he trying to imitate that pesky fake crown prince? Pretending to be dead so that you can appear before me later? Search for him. He should be nearby.”

Considering the order just given, it was hard to tell whether or not the emperor had lost his mind.

Thereupon, a new report arrived. One of the pages who had served Simon was at the gate and was requesting an audience with His Majesty.

The imperial court was already abuzz with news of what had happened.

“Show him in,” the emperor gave his permission.

The page who had been granted an audience was a young boy with an honest-looking face. A single glance was enough to conclude that he had a lot in common with Simon. He was probably of good pedigree and, immediately upon learning of Simon’s death, he had set out to accomplish his duty to the best of his ability; even though it meant appearing before the emperor himself and even though he was currently as white as a sheet.

“The day before yesterday, Lord Rodloom called for me in the evening and handed me *this*. ‘Deliver it to the emperor the day after tomorrow’, he said.”

It was a wooden box of a size that could be carried under one arm. At first the page had been hesitant to take it since it was impossible for someone in his position to meet with the emperor. Moreover, those who were close to Simon were being kept away from the palace.

But Simon had simply smiled enigmatically. “What? There’s a small trick to it. You’ll understand the day after tomorrow. His Majesty will certainly agree to meet you,” he had said.

Because when he was saying it, he had looked as though he were looking forward to that time, the page had thought that he was probably preparing some kind of joke and so, in the end, he had taken the box. Not for a second had he thought that the ‘trick’ Simon spoke of would be related to his own death.

“Of course,” the emperor almost bellowed, “damn you Simon, of course you set fire to your own house. Show me.”

Normally, the emperor would never take something directly from the hands of someone from the lower classes. It would always pass through the hands of a third person who check it for safety reasons, but now the emperor practically snatched the box with his own hands.

He lifted the lid.

His expression turned completely unreadable.

His previous scornful smile had already vanished, but it was replaced with neither anger nor sadness. the emperor ordered everyone to clear out then returned to his bedroom with the box in his hands. Guhl Mephius took out what was in the box and lifted it up.

An old-style handgun that gleamed dark in the morning sun, which was pouring through a gap in the curtains.

It was in mint condition. Simon being Simon, even if he had kept it for self-defence, he probably had not fired it once, even to try it out.

There was nothing else inside the box. Not even a letter. It had only contained that handgun.

When he checked, there was a single round loaded.

Guhl spun the cylinder then pulled the trigger.

The response was an empty click. He continued to pull again and again. Spinning the cylinder each time.



“Well then,” Guhl muttered in a low voice, as if he did not want anyone else to hear, even though there was no one else in the room, “wouldn’t it be easy to blow my brains out with this?”

He could read Simon’s mind. His motive had probably been something close to what Guhl had just mentioned.

To use this to cut my life short or to aim at yours – you know which would, by rights, have been the best thing to do – was what Simon wanted to say.

And the emperor, of course, understood why. It was because of the families of the two generals who had joined the crown prince’s side. He had expected some kind of a reaction from Simon immediately after he had decreed the executions, and had in fact found it strange when there had been nothing but silence.

“And for that very reason...”

For that very reason, Simon should have picked up the gun and carried out a heroic suicide. It would have been far more effective if he had done so. And there should have been at least one letter. Simon should have left words of reproof against the emperor before shooting himself in the head, words which would have resonated with the many nobles and commanders who admired Simon. He would thus have earned fame for his chivalry and his name would have remained for a long time in Mephius.

Instead of which, Simon deliberately chose not to leave any words behind and to act out the shameful role of one who had caused a fire after getting drunk.

There again, the emperor could read his intentions.

Even in exchange for his own life, he had been worried about his old friend. Since it was fine as long as the emperor alone received his message, he had set fire to his own house.

“Damned imbecile!” This time, the emperor roared out loud. He paced up and down in long strides, acting as though he were trying to seize Simon, who could no longer be there. “Astounding. Does even a man like you not understand? Don’t you understand?”

Guhl’s eyes were flaring and his cheeks were quivering furiously. Drool flying from his open mouth, he spat out one angry roar after another.

“That damned imbecile. Fool. Unrivalled idiot. Are you happy now? Using your life however you want, without my permission. Are you happy now that you’re looking down at me from far above?”

Then, the emperor the handgun that he was still holding and held it level with his heart.

He pulled the trigger.

A gunshot resounded and a hole was drilled into the room’s expensive furniture.

“Your Majesty!”

He could hear his attendant soldiers yelling from the other side of the door. “Leave it!” He yelled as he contemplated the gunpowder smoke rising from the muzzle.

“A funeral gun salute for you, you bastard. Watch it well, Simon!” He flung those words in a shout.

– Later, the emperor had Simon’s remains carried to the Dragon Gods’ temple.

Since the funeral of the former chairman of the Council, Simon Rodloom, took precedence, the execution of Rogue and Odyne’s families was temporarily suspended.

Simon’s death however was not without effect.

For example, the footsteps of the soldiers who were assembling in Solon from all over grew sluggish along the way. Because lords like those of Kilro and Idoro came up with reasons to delay dispatching their troops, the reinforcements which should have been sent to Nedain still had yet to be organised.

More than ever before, there were voices openly whispering their support for Crown Prince Gil Mephius and the retainers, sensing the way the wind was blowing, found opportunities to meet in secret and seriously discuss their future course of action.

The wind, yes.

It was certainly blowing in favour of Gil Mephius.

Soon after Simon lost his life, Garbera and Ende started to move.

PART 3

Zenon Owell, the second prince of Garbera, was at the bridge of an air carrier that was flying from the capital, Phozon, to Zaim Fortress which protected the northern border. They were going on military duties.

Or at least, that was what Zenon himself was expecting.

Terrified of internal strife, his father, King Ainn, and his older brother, Razetta, had adopted indecisive attitudes; but Zenon was convinced that whatever Salamand was planning would bring about a disaster that Garbera would not be able to recover from.

Salamand Fogel. The vice-captain of the Order of the Badger had won no little amount of fame, but, as a fervent admirer of Ryucown's, he was also a man who wished to resume the war with Mephius.

According to him, it was 'to protect the pride of chivalry'.

Once upon a time, Prince Zenon had thought the same thing. But not anymore. Which was not to say that he had lost his 'pride in chivalry'. Each person had different beliefs and loyalties.

Salamand had advocated to the King that they should take back Princess Vileena, whom Mephius had branded a dishonourable traitor. It was to the point that her whereabouts in Mephius were unknown. If the people of Garbera were to learn of that, their feelings towards Mephius would inevitably and instantly deteriorate. Sometimes, the feelings of the people gave rise to situations that exceeded both their leaders' predictions and their ability to contain them, and there was a risk that this might turn into just such a situation.

King Ainn Owell had allowed himself to be persuaded by the other retainers and had agreed to send a letter to Mephius. Salamand was given the task of taking it to Solon and, in the name of "showing them that we are serious," he had gotten the King to consent to him leading several units of knights to Zaim as well. The movement of troops was a military manoeuvre in itself that would incite Mephius to remember their alliance, he reasoned.

However, according to information from Miss Rinoa Kotjun and from Zenon's friend Noue, those in sympathy with Salamand had already carried a large number of

weapons to Zaim and there was a high chance that they had even captured the fortress itself.

Salamand, you bastard.

Could it be that he intended to trespass into Mephius without waiting for the king's authorisation? Thinking that, Zenon had immediately, and while in full armour, sought an audience with the king. He had requested permission to subjugate Salamand but his sovereign and his older brother, still unable to perceive Salamand's real intentions, had been cautious.

Zenon had therefore carefully chosen his words. "I will start by heading towards Zaim with only a few men." Following that, he had been granted to proceed to Zaim for the time being. From there, he had immediately hopped onto an air carrier that Rinoa had gotten ready. Along with twenty knights, he had ridden north, above the grass-covered plains of Garbera. Even though he had said that he would "start" that way, the truth was that at that point his men from the Order of the Tiger had already set off from their various locations. The one who had arranged for their ships was once again Rinoa.

While on the way, one of the ships had stopped at a supply base. Noue Salzantes had been waiting there.

On board the ship, in a cabin reserved for Zenon's exclusive use, the two of them met up.

"There's some unfortunate news," after hurriedly giving his greetings, Noue cut straight to the point.

"What is it? Has Salamand reached Zaim?"

"Well there is that too."

"If my father would just have made his decision a little faster – well, there's no help for it now. And? What is this other bad news?"

He signalled with his eyes to the page who was laying out tea to leave the room. Once there was no one else there, Noue twiddled with the black hair that fell over his shoulders and said something strange.

“In Mephius, a man claiming to be Crown Prince Gil has appeared. And our Garbera’s Princess Vileena is by his side.”

“Huh?”

Zenon looked bewildered for a second.

“Huh!”

But then immediately changed the inflection of his words. His expression however showed mixed feelings.

“Wait, how is this bad? My little sister is alive, how could that be anything but good? No, but, a man claiming to be the prince? Wasn’t he supposed to have died after being betrayed by a retainer? Which means, he’s an impostor? Then, then is my sister by his side also an impostor? I don’t understand! Talk in a way that I can understand!”

He spoke in one go, not pausing once for breath. Noue nodded and gave a summary of the information he had obtained concerning Mephius. Zenon listened in silence then said,

“Interesting. It feels like something which couldn’t possibly be happening within one of our neighbouring countries but rather somewhere completely different. Noue, what do you think? the prince, and also Vileena, are they the real ones?”

“I have not yet been able to obtain any certain evidence. However, I believe that there is a strong possibility that they are. Rogue and Odyne, who rose in rebellion in Apta, are both known as upright commanders. So it would be perfectly plausible for them to stand up against the emperor’s tyranny; but they are not the sort of people who would then deliberately set up an impostor as the crown prince to validate their cause. Moreover, it makes no sense to bring out an impostor of the princess. On the contrary, claiming that while in Apta, she had gotten caught up in the war with the west and died would have been a far better way of highlighting the emperor’s viciousness. It would also have been easier for them to rebuild the relationship with our Garbera if they claimed that they were fighting in revenge for the princess.”

“I see.”

Even while he nodded, Zenon maintained a complicated expression. As her older brother, he was, of course, nothing but delighted that Vileena was alive. Moreover, he

was acquainted with Mephius' Crown Prince Gil. They had only met once, but he was a memorable man.

I'd heard he was a fool but he seems like a cunning devil – he had thought.

And then, very soon after that, when Zenon had been at the royal court, he had heard that Gil Mephius had been shot and killed by a Mephian retainer.

And that same Gil was alive.

If that turned out to be true, then Gil had probably faked his own death. That it was not a nation-wide conspiracy was clear from the fact that he was now colliding with the emperor head-on. It must be a plan that had been hatched either by Gil alone or with some people who were close to him. Was his little sister, Vileena, one of those people?

At any rate, with this, Mephius was at risk of being divided. No, from what he had heard, the hostilities had already opened and a civil war had started.

“And,” Zenon looked at Noue searchingly, “not to repeat myself, but how is this bad?”

“Salamand might also hear about it. On top of which, I would expect it to try and unsettle the court even further.”

A great many commanders would certainly be eager to seize the golden opportunity presented by a civil war in Mephius. Moreover, a Garberan princess was at the side of the crown prince who was fighting against the current regime.

Which meant that there was plenty of room to intervene in that civil war.

“And that also means seizing Mephius' land and assets like looters at a fire.”

“We can assume so,” even though nobody was present, Noue spoke in a whisper, “and not only that, those who would get in the way of devouring Mephius once the disturbance is settled could be quietly made to disappear – that possibility also exists.”

“You mean Crown Prince Gil?”

“I mean Princess Vileena.”

At Noue's words, Zenon pursed his lips and bit back his voice which had almost cried out in surprise.

"Whether the emperor or the crown prince wins, Mephius will unavoidably be weakened. Those who wanted to fight Mephius to the end during the war will only be able to gain political influence if Princess Vileena, the embodiment of the peace between us, disappears. Pardon my discourtesy, but I do not think that the king would have any arguments convincing enough to stop them, and I expect that he would let them persuade him into going for full-scale military manoeuvres."

"..."

If that were to happen, Garbera would certainly profit from it. However, those who wanted to fight Mephius were at odds with Zenon's current way of thinking. One could even call them political opponents. After pondering for a while, he said –

"Those who would destroy other countries, even at the cost of silencing their own royal family, cannot build a future that embodies Garbera's chivalrous ideals."

"Truly," Noue nodded his slender chin.

His attitude was for all the world like that of a young man worried about his country's future, but if anyone who knew about his recent past were present, they might well look at him and think – *you sly bastard*. Since, after all, Noue had most certainly schemed to have Princess Vileena killed.

"Setting the question of Vileena aside," Zenon raised his fist to his chest, "there's no doubt that Salamand is a man who looks down on the royal family and who will stop at nothing. We need to stop him at all cost before he manages to beguile my father with his smooth-tongued wiles."

And if they pulled through this fight then –

Gil Mephius. I look forward to checking with my own eyes whether you are real or fake.

From there on, Zenon's flight did not encounter any obstacles along the way and arrived at the point where Zaim Fortress was right before them.

They purposely let themselves be seen and landed within sight of the sentries. Even though they were flying the banner that proved that a member of the royal family was on board, no one from the fortress came to greet them. In place of that, soldiers were waiting for them, spears in hand.

Zenon Owell alighted from the ship and, accompanied by several attendants, he walked up to the gates.

“We were waiting for you, Prince Zenon.”

From the other side of the soldiers’ spears, Zenon looked at them as though contemplating something curious.

“It seems you know who you’re pointing those spears at.”

There was no reply.

Every one of the soldiers had pale faces, but the eyes within those faces seemed to blaze with fire.

So Zaim has fallen into the hands of rebels again? The thought flitted through the prince’s mind.

This was the land of Ryucown’s uprising and of Ryucown’s downfall.

“Is Salamand not coming out?”

“If he came out, he would kill Your Highness.”

“Oh really, are you worried about my safety? Well then, see you next time.”

Zenon did not enjoy drawn-out chatter. His cloak flapping, he once more boarded the ship.

The soldiers watched as the ship disappeared from sight in the sky and, although their expressions were becoming increasingly tight at having defied the royal family, they were relieved at having, for now, achieved their aim.

With this, we’ll have bought some time.

But –

“Enemy attack, enemy attack!”

It was less than an hour later that the airships sent out in reconnaissance literally came flying back, shouting that as they did so.

The soldiers standing guard at the gates soon saw it for themselves. A group on horseback was riding up amidst a cloud of dust. The flag of Zenon Owell’s Knights of the Order of the Tiger fluttered gallantly in the evening shadows.

When he was turned away at the gates, Zenon had accomplished his promise to the King to “start by calling with only a few soldiers.” Neither the King nor Salamand could have predicted that his second move would come so soon, but that was not currently Zenon’s problem.

He had more than a thousand soldiers ride in five of the ships that Rinoa had prepared. The remaining ship had been equipped with weapons and was at the rear, serving as the flagship.

Naturally, the fortress was thrown into confusion both inside and out.

“It’s the Order of the Tiger!”

“Impossible. It’s too soon. Was His Highness planning on attacking us from the start?”

“We can worry about that later. Enemy attack, enemy attack!”

For the second time since Ryucown’s uprising, the signs of war were looming over Zaim fortress.

“Prince Zenon is attacking?”

Salamand Fogel received the report just as the preparations for weapons and provisions had been finished and he was about to set off on horseback.

But they were still at the fortress’ west gate. He had not been expecting Zenon to attack so quickly.

Salamand was to lead eight hundred of his men west of the fortress during the night.

After which, the troops remaining in Zaim would use a single air carrier to fly towards the Mephian border garrison. And bombard them. Once the garrison had fallen into chaos, the plan had been for them to cross over the Bruno Hills. In other words, he had not, from the start, had the slightest intention of officially conveying the King's letter to the emperor.

But Zenon had been far faster than anticipated.

Within the royal family, which had grown craven since the war with Mephius, Zenon was the only one the Salamand recognised as a true leader and commander.

"What should we do, Lord Salamand?"

His subordinates from the Order of the Badger asked, their faces filled with tension.

"If it turns into a battle here, Mephius will notice what is happening in Zaim and the border garrison will be on alert. Shall we put the plan forward and have our ship attack them at once?"

"No, then the fortress will be insufficiently manned. If Prince Zenon takes Zaim too quickly, we'll be at risk from the rear."

In front of his men who were raising their voices fretfully, Salamand let go of the horse whose back he had just been about to jump onto and instead sat down on the spot with a thump. As a commander, he had learned from Ryucown that in times like these, he needed to demonstrate an attitude as firm as a rock. He closed his eyes for a moment before opening them wide and sharp.

"First, strengthen the fortress' defence," he shouted. "Zaim isn't a fortress that will fold under one or two attacks, even if the enemy strength is twice or three times ours."

If they learned that there was internal disturbance within Garbera, the border garrison was more likely to spring into action instead. Until reinforcements arrived, that might, in fact, make it easier for them to find a chance than it would have under normal circumstances.

Dressed in the heavy, multi-layered armour that was traditional to Garbera, Salamand vigorously stood up.

"Battle stations!"

As a signal that he was declaring war, Zenon Owell had his warship perform a long-distance bombardment.

Nonetheless, Zaim was a fortress that protected Garbera from Ende in the north and Mephius in the west. They could not afford to destroy it. So he left things at the level of a threat.

The ground heaved with each roar of the guns and sprays of earth went flying.

Once it had started, Zenon gave the Knights of the Order of the Tiger the command to charge.

As previously stated, however, Zaim was Garbera's sturdiest fortress. Because practically the only roads leading to it stretched out towards the south, the level ground there was studded with towers and gun batteries from where shooting and shelling spewed forth. Because of that, the infantry and cavalry troops could not get close to it and, since the line of fire also covered the skies, the airship units could not approach either.

"Zaim lives up to its reputation. Was it a little too reckless to attempt a ground war with only a thousand soldiers?" Noue Salzantes murmured from the sky. Riding at the rear of an airship, he was gazing at the battlefield through a pair of binoculars.

Without even sallying from the gates, the enemy was completely sweeping back the knights' assault.

"Send up a beacon." Once he had grasped the situation, Noue alighted back onto land and gave his instructions to a messenger. "Retreat. We're retreating."

The battle had not lasted even two hours.

The Knights of the Order of the Tiger started to pull back. From the fortress, they could hear the bellows of the soldiers, who were in high spirits.

While all the knights drew back to where the flagship was, Noue continued to gaze at the fortress.

"Is there no way to get them to pursue us?" He muttered.

He too returned to the ship and reported to Prince Zenon, who was on the bridge.

“Damn you, Salamand. Is he planning on a siege war?” Zenon practically spat out the name of the man who was now a traitor.

“We can assume that too,” Noue put a slender finger to his chin. “If he has chosen to oppose the royal family, then instead of drawing Your Highness to the fortress, he should be looking for a way to capture you or to take advantage of any opening. Having already turned his sword against the royal family, he should no longer have the leisure of being able to choose his methods. And yet, on top of deliberately placing himself on the receiving end of an attack, he didn’t even give chase when we withdrew.”

“Meaning?”

“Zaim is a sacrificial pawn. No doubt meant to buy time for Salamand to cross over the border.”

When he heard ‘cross over the border’, Zenon’s expression changed. According to Noue’s earlier predictions, and also to Rinoa Kotjun’s apprehensions, Salamand intended to drive a wedge between Garbera and Mephius, even at the cost of his own life, so as to rouse Garbera to war.

“Then we no longer have the leisure of choosing our means either,” Zenon said with a determined look. “The enemy shouldn’t have many ships. Shall we use our own to bombard the gates into oblivion and then charge immediately after?”

“No...” Noue’s long hair swayed as he shook his head. “We will wait, Your Highness.”

“Wait?”

“Yes. Since you arrived faster than expected, Prince Zenon, Salamand’s situation has changed. Let’s keep an eye on them and take our time waiting until the enemy gets impatient and launches their own attack.”

Noue’s expression was perfectly cool. He said to ‘wait’ even though he himself had pointed out that the enemy was stalling for time. Zenon was dumbfounded, but as Noue explained his plan, he was gradually won over to it.

As a matter of fact, Salamand Fogel was getting impatient at that very moment. The defence had been solidified in the expectation of a second and third round of assault; but after the first attack, Zenon had not made any other move. Mephius' border garrison also seemed to have adopted a wait-and-see attitude, and there had been no signs of any particular activity. Of course, in terms of internal strife, Mephius had been there first. If they were to request reinforcements, there was a good chance that the response would be slow; so they were not going to make any reckless moves.

Even though that's why this was such a good chance – Salamand ground his teeth, looking for all the world like the bear which had given its name to his Order.

The original plan had been to bring out their ship to attract the garrison's attention.

But if they took the ship out now, the fort would be under-manned. It would make no sense to cross the border only to have Zenon pounce on them from behind.

"Damn you, Zenon."

After two days had passed, Salamand realised that they were wasting too much time. The more time went by, the more they were the ones at a disadvantage. Unlike Ryucown, who had been promised supplies from Ende in the north, Salamand was alone and unaided. Once the provisions and water had been used up, it would no longer be question of the path of chivalry.

In that case...

Salamand had no ordinary amount of determination. Late that night, he removed all the wine casks from the ship and treated the soldiers to the contents.

"Drink, drink," he encouraged them. "The braves who want to be the first to rush to General Ryucown's side, raise your swords and I will grant you a speedy death!"

Salamand chose three hundred of his men to cross the border with him and assembled them into a suicide corps.

On the third day, after Zenon had established his troops' position, and in the same way that they had when he had visited Zaim, the fortress' gates were thrown open. Most of the troops within poured out like an avalanche. Salamand's forces intended to stun the enemy with this onslaught.

However, at that very moment, the prince's formation split left and right. From their centre, looking as though it were gliding along the slope of a small hill, Zenon's flagship came into sight. It was obvious from the ship's timing that they had been expecting the attack, and beneath their helmets, Salamand's men wore shocked expressions.

The ship flew over the clash between the Order of the Tiger's cavalry and Salamand's infantry soldiers, and headed for the skies over Zaim Fortress. The fortress' cannons and guns, which had been providing covering fire to the ground charge, did not have time to adjust their aim.

The flagship's lower gun turrets rotated and fired rounds in quick succession. Beneath the booming guns, the ground shook as though in an earthquake. Even the air seemed to be trembling. Once the bombardment was over, and the ship had flown away from the fortress for fear of its anti-aircraft fire, Zaim's southern gate and bulwark lay smashed into tiny pieces.

Having made sure of that, the ship quickly released a unit of small airships. Contrary to expectations, the ships did not swoop around the fortress to encircle it, but instead guarded the carrier as it descended towards the ground. Having landed, this time it discharged a huge number of cavalry soldiers.

The new arrival of knights caught Salamand's troops in a pincer movement. Meanwhile, the airship unit finally began bombing the fortress, aiming to suppress its gunfire.

Destroying the fortress that protected their own borders was an unimaginably reckless and violent method, but according to Zenon, it was – *fine as long as the north-facing walls remain sturdy*. He had decided that, even if the southern side was wrecked, it would be an acceptable loss.

Seeing Salamand's army abruptly collapse, Prince Zenon spurred his own warhorse on.

“Charge!”

Leading three hundred of his elite troops, he closed in on the fortress from its front.

“Dammit,” Salamand cursed, realising that his troops had so easily been lured out. But

even so, “it’s fine, we ride. Even if we only kick up this much dust, the Mephian garrison won’t be able to ignore it. Be prepared for sacrifices and cut through!”

Such a prompt decision was perhaps something to be expected from an officer that even Zenon recognised. And this drastic step brought about some good luck for Salamand who had been continuously plagued with misfortune.

Had the decision been delayed, the Mephian border garrison would have been set up in position along the way leading from Zaim, and would have been able to repelled Salamand’s troop of five hundred. But the Mephian response was slower than Zenon and Noue had anticipated. Seeing dust rising from Zaim, they were, for a short moment, thrown into confusion. And Salamand’s unit was able to make use of that gap to charge at them from the flank.

Salamand did not need to annihilate the garrison. And in any case, Zenon’s troops were right behind them. It was doubtful whether they would continue chasing them over the border, and as long as they could outdistance their enemies, there was a good chance that both Zenon’s troops and Mephius’ side would be left in chaos.

“Hurry, all of you!” at the head of the unit, Salamand shouted fit to tear his own throat, kicking his horse’s flanks. He dodged the spears that flashed towards him from the ground and with an easy strike of his sword sent the head of a Mephian soldier flying.

For General Ryurown. And for Garbera’s future.

As blood sprayed, Salamand plunged forward without looking back and inwardly recited that like an incantation. He would get as close as he could to the imperial capital, and if possible, clash with the main body of Mephius’ army, and die. That was Salamand’s only wish.

Once word spread of how they had desperately tried to rescue Princess Vileena, their cause would be vindicated and public opinion within Garbera would instantly swing in favour of war against Mephius.

Meanwhile, Zenon Owell was exterminating Salamand’s ground troops. He was however experiencing greater difficulty than expected because of how desperately the enemy fought. It felt as though in each soldier, he could see Ryurown’s ghost.

You’re willing to go that far.

His armour drenched in blood, Zenon entered Zaim. As they had feared, Salamand had led a unit across the border. Sending a messenger to Mephius' border garrison, it turned out that they had taken damage from Salamand's charge. It did not seem that they would be at all inclined to trust his suggestion that half of them be sent in pursuit while the other half remained there on alert.

He had no choice but to circumvent the border and send messengers directly to the capital. Zenon chose several courageous men and had them head towards Mephius' capital, Solon, each taking different routes.

It was only after he had finished giving orders that Zenon realised that he was still grasping his blood-covered sword and returned it to his waist. If Salamand managed to successfully carry out his plan, his own country might be split right in half.

If it's Father...

He was afraid that, rather than letting the country be torn apart, his father might take advantage of the civil war in Mephius to send soldiers. Although he could see how that would be the correct decision for a statesman to make, giving in to agitators out of fear of a temporary disturbance would be fatal to the royal family's prestige.

Ryucown.

Zaim Fortress was still filled with dust and the smoke of gunpowder. And amidst that dense fog, it seemed to Zenon that he had seen that young warrior's imposing figure, all clad in armour.

CHAPTER 4

INTERVENTION

PART 1

It had been about ten days since the thousand or so soldiers from the crown prince's army and the more than one thousand five hundred from the Mephian army had started their stand-off around Nedain.

Orba, who still remained in Birac, had received a succession of messages.

The first was about the fire that had occurred in Solon. In other words, it was about Simon Rodloom's death.

When they received the news, Rogue and Odyne wept in secret. Although the truth about Simon's death had, of course, been concealed, they understood what lay behind it after hearing that, on the grounds that the funeral took precedence, their families' executions had been temporarily put on hold.

"I believed that Lord Simon would surely become a strong ally for us."

When Odyne said that, Rogue shook his head, his eyes closed.

"No. He'd known His Majesty longer than anyone. And his principles were stronger than anyone's. Having stood by the emperor's side, his heart would not have allowed such a betrayal."

That person... Orba too was momentarily stunned.

They had not had any deep relationship. But because Simon had been something like the 'previous' Gil Mephius' guardian, they had had several opportunities to meet face-to-face and talk.

He had been a man with a gentle manner. He did not have the kind of charisma that strongly attracted people or an explosive ability to take action. Even so, although Orba had met a great many nobles and royals in less than a year, Simon was not a man who had been buried under those other memories.

From what he had heard, whenever any kind of problem arose in Mephius, he was the first person consulted; and whenever trouble sprang up between nobles or military commanders, Simon was the first to be called upon to mediate.

Orba had felt like he could understand why that was.

And it was just such a man who had died.

Of course, Orba also realised that it had been to save Rogue and Odyne's families. Perhaps he had also hoped that the emperor would have a change of heart because of it.

Orba realised that this man's death had given him an unexpectedly strong shock.

It was not sentimentality.

It was undoubtedly Orba himself who had created the situation that caused Simon to incur the emperor's displeasure. Because he had stood up for the prince when the latter had disobeyed the emperor and rushed off to Garbera with reinforcements, Simon had been punished with house arrest. It was also because of Orba's actions, while wearing the "mask" of Gil, that Rogue and Odyne had directly opposed the emperor; and since Simon had chosen suicide as a way of saving them, Orba was also the cause of his death.

However, Orba no longer intended to go around thinking – *this is my fault*.

Just as with the general of the Dawnlight Wings Division, Rogue, and the general of the Silver Axe Division, Odyne, Simon had held his own beliefs and principles, which he himself had acted on.

That was all.

Nevertheless, through their actions of offering up their own lives, Orba felt as though he caught a glimpse of the many heroes that he had met in the west, including a proud queen from those lands.

In the past, the Mephian soldiers and nobles had been no more than targets of hatred to him. He had wanted to burn the whole lot of them in a sea of fire. But now that his field of vision was wider, he could see that here too there were many heroes.

And when he had learned that one of them had chosen to die for Mephius' sake, the shock had left him speechless.

Naturally, it was not only Orba or the generals, Rogue and Odyne, who felt that way; the people and the dignitaries of Mephius felt the same. It was clear to all that Simon had been one of the pillars supporting the country. Now that they had lost him, the retainers and the populace were even more anxious about the future.

At times like these, they needed something new to guide them. New blood. A new hero.

And in that sense, Simon's death turned into a wind at Orba's back that pushed him forward.

As proof of that, even in Solon –

“That man who claims to be His Imperial Highness...”

“Since he was able to take Birac, he's definitely not an ordinary person.”

“They say that he didn't take the heads of those who stood against him, Folker included. Does that really sound like just any old swindler?”

– Rumours were finally turning in his favour. And also –

“His Majesty intends to subjugate through military force, but wouldn't it be better to send a messenger and invite him to an audience?”

“Oh, that's right. If we could see him in person, we'd be able to tell whether he was real or an impostor. Then no one would have to fight this useless war.”

– Voices expressing that kind of sentiment started to filter through from all over.

As mentioned before, the wind was starting to blow in favour of the new hero, Gil Mephius. But all of a sudden, that wind was disturbed.

“Garbera's troops fought against each other at Zaim?”

In his office, Orba drew his brows together. The next piece of news to reach Orba after Simon's death was just as unexpected.

Zaim Fortress was a place that he had a deep connection. The impregnable fortress at Garbera's northernmost border. It was the land in which Gil had led his first campaign and killed Ryucown, and also the place that he hurried to with reinforcements all the way from Apta when Garbera and Ende had clashed at the fortress.

Prince Zenon and Garbera's troops had exchanged blows with those of a man called Salamand Fogel at Zaim. After which, Salamand had managed to break across the border and enter Mephian territory.

And his purpose – the great cause for which he was even prepared to violate the border – was to rescue the Garberan princess.

“Mephius is looking down on our country's exalted lineage,” Salamand clamoured vociferously. “After her fiancé, Prince Gil, died, they came up with one reason after another to keep her inside the country. Because the emperor of Mephius had designs on the west, he held the princess hostage as a way of preventing my country from taking action. And to make matters worse, after having kept the princess confined, they're now accusing her of being a traitor!”

The Mephian side was at a disadvantage there, since the Garberan princess had gone missing for a while. Rumours had spread because of the princess' involvement in the war with the west but, once she reappeared alongside a crown prince who appeared to be linked to said west, things got complicated.

“Mephius never intended to conclude peace with us from the start. That marriage was nothing more than a temporary cover for them because it looked as though they were about to lose the war. I demand that they return the princess to us at once. After which, we can fight and settle things once and for all.”

Salamand sent an envoy to Solon carrying that message. Naturally, that envoy's head had already been cut off at the emperor's hands.

However, he had probably been expecting that and Salamand was now boldly occupying a village in the Vlad Plateau. He was waiting for the Mephian side to make a move while he lodged his soldiers there.

And of course, there was no way that Mephius could just ignore the situation. Having said that, it was equally obvious that Garbera would launch itself at the first hint of Salamand's death. However, since the princess was at the crown prince's side, it was also impossible to return her.

Curse Garbera, seeing through our situation.

Isn't it them rather, talking about peace and a wedding, using the princess and waiting until we've been weakened.

Just as in Garbera, there had been many in Mephius who had been unhappy about how the ten-year war had ended. Since it had been Emperor Guhl's decision and he was strongly inclined towards despotism, there had been few people who openly stated their opposition; however there were a great many people who would potentially be in favour of resuming war with Garbera.

In other words, both in Mephius and in Garbera, popular sentiment was being ignited because of Salamand. And that was dispelling the wind which had been favourable to Crown Prince Gil. His existence was instead becoming a hindrance.

There were no rumours about how Emperor Guhl was reacting. It was said though that he had sent a letter to the king of Garbera and that soldiers had been detached from those gathered to defend Solon in order to put Salamand down.

At any rate –

If this carries on for long, it'll be a problem.

In front of his subordinates, Orba kept his expression neutral, but inwardly, he was grinding his teeth.

For Guhl, this was in a sense providential. If the crown prince and the Garberan Princess lost their unifying force, he would, for the time being, be able to bring the country together. After that, he would still need to deal with the neighbouring countries, but most statesmen would consider external threats preferable to internal ones. Since the emperor had been exploring ways to forge a connection to Ende, despite being in an alliance with Garbera, it was quite possible that now that there was a conflict between them, he could now conclude a military alliance with Ende.

"This Salamand, he could very well be acting at His Majesty's instigation," said Rogue. Because his expression was serious, it was hard to tell whether he was joking or not.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case," answered Orba, also remaining deliberately grave. "Still, with this, we'll probably have to spend even more time waiting to see what happens."

During this time, Gilliam had returned to Birac to bring the regularly-scheduled report from the front lines. Hearing that they would be continuing to face off and wait, he looked thoroughly fed up.

“How boring.” He really was very easy to read. “That Raymond guy can’t help getting impatient. Besides, there’s his little sister and the people of Nedain... heh, if his self-control snaps, he might just march in there alone.”

“Then when that happens, put that bulky body of yours to use and stop him.”

“It’s for that reason that I’ve received such a ridiculously large body from my parents – right?”

For some reason, the two of them laughed soundlessly.

After which, Gilliam suddenly brought his face in close. “That Salamand guy’s troops are about six hundred at best. Prince, if it comes down to it, lend me two hundred men. I’m good at stirring things up with just a few people,” he laughed fearlessly.

Orba answered that he would think about it.

In fact though, whether it was the crown prince’s side or the emperor’s which defeated Salamand it would not make much difference to Garbera’s internal situation.

Orba wanted to avoid wars with any neighbouring countries for now. All the more so since he was the one who had created this political instability.

Shit!

After taking Birac and failing to capture Nedain, he had been forced into a ‘waiting’ attitude. But now that the situation had changed, was maintaining that attitude the best thing to do? If he made an impatient move, all the time spent up until now would most certainly be wasted; but allowing a foreign enemy to invade would only result in needless devastation to the country.

In this situation, he could neither move his soldiers, nor sit waiting.

Now that things were like this, Simon’s death was an even harder blow.

In a way, that man had undoubtedly been even more of a unifying force than the

emperor. One of the plans Orba had been toying with was, if necessary, getting in touch either with Simon himself or with those who wished for his return to the centre stage of politics, and induce them to make a move from inside Solon.

But that option had now collapsed.

He did not have many hands left to play or plans that he could come up with.

A different sort of threat than that of a direct attempt on his life seemed to be forming. Spears and swords that were now crowding around Orba's neck.

Meanwhile –

“Salamand. I’ve never heard that name.”

The one who muttered that was Vileena Owell as she stood before an open window. Her hands on her waist and her eyes narrowed as far as they would go, she sighed, her posture every bit that of a warrior.

“Princess, please close the window.”

Which did not, however, prevent her from being scolded by Theresia from behind.

“You are already in poor shape and the night wind is terrible for the health.”

“What poor shape? In the first place, a person who damages their own health when facing an urgent situation cannot be considered a warrior. That would be something only a fool would... *Atchoo!*”

Vileena's utterly earnest expression twisted suddenly as she gave a ferocious sneeze. Theresia looked thoroughly exasperated.

“Princesses are not warriors, nor should they be fools. Now then, I’ve brewed some hot tea so hurry on over here.”

Vileena had been suffering from a slight cold since the previous day. She was in a land that she was not used to, which made Theresia all the more worried. Vileena meekly shut the window and took her seat at the table.

“Theresia, had you ever heard the name ‘Salamand’?”

“Well now. I don’t have anything to do with the military.”

“A man I’ve never met is using my name and hindering Mephius while preaching his own selfish version of chivalry. Actually no, it’s not only Mephius but also Garbera. I can’t stand it.”

“When you say that you cannot stand it, it sounds as though you are about to set off and kill that man Salamand.”

“Hmm. That’s a good idea,” responded Vileena, a teacup in hand.

Although outwardly she could still afford to joke about it, just like Orba’s, her inner feelings were a bit more complicated.

Theresia changed the subject.

“Speaking of which, it seems that Lord Rodloom has passed away.”

“Yes.”

While she sipped her tea, Vileena’s expression turned markedly quiet. Other than exchanging greetings, the only time she had ever really spoken with Simon Rodloom was when she went to visit him at his mansion just before she left Solon. Despite that, the news of his death had caused her heart quite a lot of pain.

He had been a gentle person, but one who went to the core of one’s body and soul. That comfortable conversation had, in a way, reminded Vileena of the time she used to spend with her grandfather.

“I’ve heard that he was something like a guardian to His Highness. I’m sure His Highness must be grieving over his death.”

“I’ve happened to catch sight several times of the people of Birac offering up prayers for Lord Rodloom. He must have been a truly splendid gentleman.”

“Ah. He maintained the dignity of the chosen right to the very end. That is true chivalry. I would like to thrust it in front of that Salamand fellow.” It looked as though the princess could not break free from that topic.

Theresia shrugged. She knew that once her mistress became emotionally wound up, she would not settle back down for a long time.

“After you have finished drinking your tea, please go and have a rest. If you damage your health, Princess, His Highness Gil will worry.”

“I get it.”

She was a princess who hated being a burden. Even if she were running a fever so high it gave her nightmares, even if her limbs ached so much it felt as though they were about to fall off, she would grit her teeth and endure it alone so that no one would realise. Theresia knew that, so she did not relentlessly pester the princess to rest.

Layla, who had been watching the exchange between the two, went shopping at Birac’s market the next day.

“Just about five days ago, a medicine seller with a really good reputation started coming to the morning market,” the woman in charge of the fish market, whom she knew by sight, had told her.

Even though it was called a common cold, every land had its own characteristics and, likewise, every land had its own characteristic cures. So Layla had asked about them.

When she went where she had been told, sure enough, there was a street stall. An elderly man had set up dried roots and jars filled with powders by the side of the road.

It was obvious at a glance that he was Zerdian. Although Layla had lived in the west, the clothes he was wearing were unfamiliar to her. Rather than Zerdian native dress, they looked like garments deliberately imitating the distorted image of what Mephians believed westerners looked like.

Maybe because that generated a feeling of goodwill, or maybe because people in Birac were used to trading with foreigners, the old, western-looking man and his stall seemed to be doing a flourishing business.

Layla headed towards it.

The man in front of her was poking around at various things while chatting with the old man as he did so. The man was apparently a soldier employed at Birac castle, and when she heard that Layla’s steps faltered for a moment. No matter how close he might

be to Fedom Aulin, the man could not possibly know her face; but it was no wonder that she was overly-cautious since, if ever Fedom learned of her existence, there was no saying what he might do to her and her father.

“Oh, you’re from the castle? Then have you met the famous Crown Prince everyone is talking about?” The stall owner asked with interest.

“Well, I know what he looks like.”

“Then please be sure to introduce me to him. My skill at mixing medicine is renowned throughout the west... no, throughout the continent...”

“That’s nice and all, but His Highness is very busy. I don’t think he’d come and spend time with a show-off, you know?”

“Who’s a show-off? Right, I bet continuously waging war means His Highness has all sorts of ails and ills. You could ask about it discreetly, no? Stomach-aches, headaches, lumbago; my medicine can cure anything. When he sees how well they work, His Highness is sure to want to meet me too.”

“You sure are persistent, Gramps.”

The man enjoyed his chat with the elderly stall-owner for a while longer, then, in the end, left without buying anything.

Once he was out of sight, Layla bought some medicinal tea from the old man. Just as she was about to leave, she caught sight of a written word from the corner of her eye.

Poison – proclaimed a signboard.

“You deal in poison?”

“If handled correctly, poison can be used as medicine. We do say that poison counters poison. Was there something you wanted?”

Layla hesitated. There was certainly a craving in her heart, but she was afraid that if she admitted it to herself, she would start down a road that there would be no turning back from.

The old man smiled. “How about just taking a look? I keep various things stored in

that unused house over there. Even if all you take out of it is knowledge, it might always come in useful later.”

Layla was not able to go against the old man’s pushiness. She entered the house, which was a little apart from the street.

“There are stairs this way. Please be careful,” the old man said lightly as he walked on ahead. Layla took his hand without really thinking about it.

In that instant, her consciousness was cut off.

“Hmm.”

By the time she heard the old man’s low voice murmuring close to her ear, how long had it already been since she had entered the house?

“Something nice has leapt into the net.”

The cheerful appearance that he had displayed at the stall had vanished without a trace. From the piercing look in his eyes and the way he threw out his broad chest, there was a dignity about him that made it hard to believe that he was a mere merchant.

This was Zafar, the old man who had served ‘Garda’ when he had waged war on the west.

PART 2

Malchio Le Doria had passed away.

Ende bordered both Mephius and Garbera, and was a country with a long history. He had been its Grand Duke.

Malchio had been an extremely commonplace ruler with no outstanding achievements to his name, although, taken otherwise, that also meant that he had committed no spectacular mistakes. When the war between Mephius and Garbera stretched on for ten years, he said nothing and did nothing. There were rumours that the nomadic tribes that periodically threatened the northern border area, Dairan, were receiving support from Zonga, which was even further to the north, so the relationship with Zonga had deteriorated somewhat; but even then, Malchio had simply gently chided his retainers and the matter had been settled peacefully after he had dispatched an envoy to them.

And thus, while there were voices that praised him as – *a benevolent ruler who has brought peace to the country*, there were others that said – *his principle of avoiding trouble at all cost is really irritating*.

Ende had inherited a flourishing culture from the Magic Dynasty. In painting and poetry, literature and architecture, it would allow itself to be second to no other country. The people however were not wealthy. Because of that, when the war had been going on for ten years, there had been those who were of the opinion that Ende should align itself with either Mephius or Garbera, and enjoy the bounty of being one of the victorious countries.

In fact, Grand Duke Malchio, who was known for his moderation, had once, and only once, taken a decisive stand. When there had been an offer to have Garbera's Princess Vileena marry his second son, Eric Amon Doria.

Essentially, Ende did not like to accept foreign blood. It boasted that it was directly descended from the Ancient Magic Dynasty which had once nearly ruled over the entire world.

Malchio, however, knew that he did not have much longer to live. At the time, his condition had been such that for every three days of work, he would spend one day bedridden. And so, he had thought –

I'll take a gamble on this.

Preparations for the wedding were pushed forward in secret. Even the army had been reorganised in anticipation of Mephuis marching on them at some point in the future. And then, the proposal had been withdrawn by Garbera itself. His two sons – Jeremie, the eldest, and Eric, the one who was supposed to marry the princess – had openly voiced their fury at having Ende's pride and history being dragged in the mud. Malchio himself however had not been particularly bothered by it.

Ah well, that just means that I've lost the gamble.

When, as a way of apologising, Garbera had sent the second prince, Zenon, as an envoy to Ende, Malchio had given him a warm reception and had exchanged vows of everlasting friendship with him.

But neither of his two sons had been satisfied.

When General Ryucown rose in rebellion in Garbera, Malchio's eldest son, Jeremie Amon Doria, had secretly offered him assistance. Then later the younger brother, Eric, as a way of "punishing" Garbera for its lack of courtesy, had taken his troops and clashed with a combined Mephian-Garberan force in the vicinity of Zaim Fortress. For a while, he had been one step away from cornering the Garberan troops led by Prince Zenon.

The Grand Duke had already been bedridden at the time and was unable to control his sons' actions. It was rare for him to even summon them to his bedside. Rumour had it that he was not even conscious most of the time.

Ende's courtiers worried over whether to support the older or the younger of the brothers, endlessly wavering and hesitating over their decision. Of the two, the one who was more deeply familiar with the culture and customs of Ende was the prudent Jeremie. On the other hand, the somewhat quick-tempered Eric had proven his dynamism and military leadership during the long years he had spent in Dairan, fighting the northern nomadic tribes, but he was unfamiliar with the customs of the Court.

A shadowy and swordless feud spread throughout the country. Everyone hoped to be among those who would lead Ende during its next era; and in order to remove any obstacles to their ambitions, some used brute force to get rid of opponents, while others used their riches or words to gather allies.

The brothers harshly criticised each other and each continued to proclaim their right to be the next Grand Duke.

Their father's voice, which should have been remonstrating with them, was nowhere to be heard.

Everyone foresaw that the time was near. And because they foresaw it, they were frantically running around, gathering like-minded allies and desperately trying to gain the trust of the prince that they had decided to support.

And when the time finally came, it did so very quietly.

Since the morning, the populace had anxiously been glancing up at the sky. In the distance, they could see Safia's palace. Separated from the capital by a vast lake and set atop a hill, the palace usually seemed to glitter with an almost divine radiance; but that day, it stood there looking lonely and somewhat sad.

The flag of the Magic Dynasty fluttered near the highest point of the palace. It denoted the legitimacy of the grand ducal family and seemed to be flapping particularly violently. Just before noon, a bell tolled, indicating that the ruler had passed away.

The people let out wails of lamentation. All recited the names of the spirits as they prayed that the Grand Duke would sleep peacefully, and that Ende too would continue to be at peace.

The next morning, the Grand Duke's closest aides summoned the chief retainers to the Swan Shrine – also known as the Water Shrine – which was frequently used in ceremonies.

A great crowd of the nobles gathered in Safia were present. Naturally, the two princes, Jeremie and Eric, were also standing aligned on the crystal-covered floor.

Once he judged that the time was right, one of the aides started to read the will left by the Grand Duke.

While the river could be seen flowing below through the transparent crystal, the thread of tension was stretched taut above. Some of the people there were so pale that it looked as though they might collapse at any moment. While Jeremie played with his braided hair, Eric had his arms crossed, and both were waiting impatiently for this moment.

“The name of the next Grand Duke of the Grand Duchy of Ende will be...”

What the aged attendant said next seemed to reverberate through every nook and cranny of the palace...

“Eric Le Doria.”

Instantly, the shrine was in an uproar.

The two princes stood as stiff and still as though a spell had been cast upon them, so that looking at them, it was impossible to tell who had won and who had lost. At the aide’s prompting, Eric hesitantly took a step forward. The elderly aide, who stood before him, bowed his head.

“From today onwards, you will throw away the name ‘Amon’ and call yourself by this new name. From today onwards, you will not be a private person: your figure, your voice, your thoughts, in all of these, you will be Ende. Your age and the years you have lived no longer mean anything. You shall shoulder the burden of the Magic Dynasty’s history, of its past and origins, and, under the protection of the Spirits, you...”

“Preposterous!” Prince Jeremie cried out. His somewhat flat face, which he usually improved with the use of cosmetics, now held unconcealed fury as he pointed a thin finger at his younger brother. “This miscreant is suspected of having forged Father’s words when he rode his warhorses towards Garbera. Who can say that is not what happened this time too!”

There might have been some who agreed with him, but Jeremie’s voice simply echoed unanswered within the Water Shrine. He was a man who could read a situation. In fact, he could do so far better than his younger brother. Grinding his teeth so hard he looked like a different person, he whirled around with the force of a gust of wind and left the shrine. His loyal followers hurried after him. There were less than ten of them.

Of course, many of the others there had also been Jeremie’s followers. Those of them who remained behind looked pale for a moment, but Ende had a long history and its aristocrats were proportionally cunning. Even as Jeremie was still leaving, their raised voices mingled with the cries of joy from Eric’s supporters and they looked, for all the world, as though they had long been dreaming of the day when he would become Grand Duke, raising their hands and their voices to offer him their congratulations.

That evening, in order to prepare for the ceremony in which he would be enthroned as the next Grand Duke, Eric was once again inside the same Water Shrine where the official proclamation had been made. Without eating or sleeping, he was to kneel on the wide crystal floor and pray ceaselessly.

It was a ceremony in which he was supposed to listen intently to the silent speeches from the Spirits who protected Ende, and watch their congratulatory dances from behind his closed eyelids, then emerge reborn in body and mind as the Grand Duke.

Time dragged slowly by and Eric felt as though he were melting into the darkness.

The Grand Duke.

I... am going to be the Grand Duke?

Although he had fought for it body and soul, the thought that, as of tomorrow, he would be shouldering the responsibility for the entire country simply did not seem real. His heart even felt somewhat chilled.

Am I really worthy?

Eric's body had been forged in battle, yet the doubts that welled up within him made him tremble. He had never felt that way when he had been competing with Jeremie.

Ende has a long history. A man like my brother might be a better suited to stand at the top of it after all. Wouldn't it fit me better to assist him by staying in Dairan and continuing to ride alongside my friends there?

It was so quiet that his own heartbeat was making his ears pound. The ceiling was studded with jewels that shone dimly under the effect of ether, filling the room with a faint phosphorescence. Their glow was reflected in the water that flowed below, throwing Eric's agonised expression into vivid relief.

What's with me being this weak?

The faces of the two men he had met in Garbera suddenly flashed through his mind: Garbera's second prince, Zenon, and Mephius' crown prince, Gil.

Both of them were young. Gil Mephius so much so that he could still be called a boy. Yet in spite of that, and without a single trace of fear, he had confidently negotiated

with both Zenon and Eric.

When he heard that Gil had died, he had not been able to believe it.

But at the same time, he had thought – *that kind of man probably makes enemies easily among those who are on the same side as him.*

But then, sometime later, that self-same Gil had resurrected and split Mephius clean apart. Reports of that had, of course, also reached Eric. He did not know whether it was an impostor or the real one. When he had first heard the rumour, he had figured that it was almost certainly the former, but now, he thought –

It'd be interesting if it was the real one.

The boy who opposed the current regime, and who was so dangerous to it that even a retainer had aimed for his life, was now marching on the capital while gathering more and more allies to him.

He was ill-bred and uncouth, and yet... Eric felt that there was a strange similarity between that figure and he himself, who was now standing at the top of Ende, a country which clung to systems so archaic that mould was growing on them.

It's my duty to get rid of that mould.

Eric straightened his posture and took a deep breath, alone and defiant in the darkness.

When it was obvious that I would become a political opponent, my brother was willing to unleash dragons on Dairan simply to push me aside. That's the kind of man he is. If I'd been one step late, who knows how many innocent people would've been torn apart by their fangs. There's no way I'm leaving the country to a man like that.

His emotions settled down.

However, early the next day.

Eric went out to face the morning of his coronation with unclouded feelings, but at around the same time that he had been finishing the preliminary ceremony, a huge

uproar broke out within the capital, Safia.

“What!”

When he received the initial report from soldiers who practically tumbled at his feet, Eric’s expression went rigid. Jeremie Amon Doria had done the worst thing that Eric could possibly have imagined. Just before dawn, he had taken action with just a small handful of troops. And had used force.

If Jeremie had attacked the Water Shrine, where Eric had gone into seclusion, he would probably have been able to accept it and would have thought – *Brother, if this is the way to prevent a lingering grudge, come at me to your heart’s content.*

Instead though, Jeremie had seized the opportunity afforded by Eric being secluded in the Water Shrine and had penetrated to the highest area of the main palace, where the flag bearing the emblem of the magic Dynasty was kept. And he had stolen the flag which should have been proudly hoisted into the morning wind to preside over the coronation ceremony.

The dozen or so soldiers who guarded the flag were the first victims. Puzzled and suspicious, they had approached Jeremie to question him but, right at that moment, the First Prince had taken out some powder from at his breast and scattered it in the air. Inhaling it, the soldiers starting coughing and choking violently, causing their steps to become unsteady. Which was when soldiers under Jeremie’s command had cut them down.

Flying the flag, splattered with the blood of his victims, Jeremie had fled Safia and was attempting to cross the border.

This was as much as Eric knew but, at almost the same time that the palace was being thrown into a complete upheaval, a similar disturbance was occurring in the Bureau of Sorcery, which normally remained detached from worldly concerns.

The doors of the underground storehouse, which the Bureau had jurisdiction over, had been thrown open and a number of ‘vessels of sorcery’ taken. These had been excavated from ancient ruins and had been handed down since the Magic Dynasty; and there were some among them that not even a prince could take out without the grand duke’s express permission.

And with them, Hezel, a sorcerer affiliated to the Bureau, was equally nowhere to be

found. The director of the Bureau of Sorcery, Wodan, flew into a towering rage.

Naturally, Eric ordered that the borders be blockaded, but Jeremie seemed to have gotten help from a sorcerer and had been swift to cross the border by airship. He was headed northwest to Zonga, a country with many ports...

With no time to hold the coronation – and anyway, without the Magic Dynasty's emblematic flag, the ceremony would have no legitimacy – Eric organised a pursuit unit. Given his personality, Eric would have liked to personally lead the chase, but since there was a chance that some of his brother's men might still be in Safia, as the next grand duke, he had no choice but to remain in the capital.

He immediately sent a letter to Zonga but, as it was a country which had once been a large commercial power thanks to its flourishing trade with the northern coastal countries, it still retained the haughty personality of those bygone days. It feigned indifference towards the petty squabbles in the central part of the continent.

Damn you Jeremie, you're really good at being prepared.

He must have even planned what to do in case he was not chosen as the next grand duke. His determination was impressive, but it was also for that reason that Eric believed that his brother was better suited to being an aide than the grand duke himself.

"If you prepare a way out beforehand, then you don't have the capacity to be a ruler," he said, putting his thoughts into words. Still, that also meant that now that they were openly enemies, Jeremie was not an opponent that he could afford to underestimate.

The silent power struggle that had long been unfolding in Ende was finally at an end. But what had replaced it was a conflict that would ring with the clash of weapons and the roar of gunfire. Which meant that there would be blood and victims.

"He can't possibly be intending to ally himself with Zonga and invade us, can he?"

What worried Eric more than Zonga, however, was where the flag of the Magic Dynasty was. In a way, that was sure to have a far greater effect on Ende's future than Jeremie's existence would.

Speaking of Jeremie, the former First Prince who had fled his country, he felt just as strongly as Eric did – or perhaps he felt it even more intensely – that his stealing the flag was the worst possible outcome.

By way of Zonga's ports, he got into touch with the powerful eastern country, Allion.

"Eric is not worthy of carrying on the lineage of the Magic Dynasty. I have the flag of the Dynasty with me. Let us now unite our purposes under this banner," he wrote in his letter.

Jeremie remained in Zonga and, two weeks later, a reply from Allion reached him there.

In this letter, and in the name of safeguarding the history and authority of the Magic Dynasty, the First Prince of Allion, Kaseria Jamil, promised to send him troops.

Specifically, troops from the division under Kaseria's direct command, which was famed for mercilessly slaughtering its opponents. He would bring a fleet with two thousand of them to Zonga.

Holding the letter, Jeremie's slender body began to tremble.

His heart was seized with a feeling of remorse so strong that anyone suddenly drawing close to him would have seen it flickering in his eyes.

Inviting in Allion's king meant a future in which Ende would either be trampled underfoot or annexed. Allion needed a foothold in the centre of the continent. Ende's current internal dispute was certainly something that they viewed as advantageous.

But the response had been too fast.

Jeremie's hands fell to his side as he suddenly realised something – *It can't be that Hezel had already laid out the groundwork?*

The sorcerer was a long-time acquaintance of his and, when the First Prince had decided on his drastic course of action, it had also been on his advice.

Could it be that the man had connections to Allion from the start? By nature, he was someone whose passion for the study of sorcery was like his life's blood. It was to the point that when he had heard that a sorcerer claiming to be Garda had appeared in

the west, he had headed off there alone to gather information, without bothering to get permission from either the Bureau of Sorcery or from Jeremie himself.

With that in mind, he might be hoping to create a situation in which the two countries which had split away from the Magic Dynasty would be united as one, allowing him to study the history books and grimoires from both.

Nevertheless –

At this rate, I will forever be known as a failure. Even if it's only for a fleeting moment, I must become Grand Duke and leave my name behind in the records of Ende's rulers.

Such was Jeremie's decision.

What had already happened could no longer be changed.

Not even the greatest of sorcerers could do so.

PART 3

The situation had changed completely.

News of Ende's internal strife and of the imminent arrival of a fleet from Allion flew around the centre of the continent almost in an instant. And the fastest to respond to that news was Salamand Fogel's unit, which was still waiting within Mephian territory.

They left some money by way of compensation for the village where they had been staying and set off immediately. They travelled west of the River Wendt, heading north to Idoro, which was the fortress that defended the easternmost tip of Mephius.

The lord of the domain, Julius, hurriedly sent a cable message to the capital. Julius, however, was in a weakened position since he, having wanted to make sure of which way the wind was blowing, he had come up with one reason or another to delay responding to the emperor's call for a dispatch of troops.

Should we go out and face them with just our own troops? It was not that Julius had never considered that possibility, but it was still unclear how this Salamand's own country intended to deal with his force.

West of Salamand's unit, as it headed north, was Kilro.

Its lord was Indolph York – an ally that Fedom, of Birac, had won over to his anti-Emperor faction. He, in turn, had been planning to rise to action in concert with Fedom and the crown prince, which left him uncertain as to how to deal with the sudden incursion by an enemy force. And as a result, he simply watched from behind as Salamand disappeared over the horizon.

"Isn't it funny?" Salamand laughed fearlessly as he rode, his entire body shaking with mirth. "It's as if everything is coming together to push me forward."

Salamand Fogel only remained in Mephius in search of a place to die. At first, it had not mattered where that was, so he had intended to just clash with Mephius' military and perish. However, now, if he used the fact that Kilro, Idoro and the capital had lost their ability to cooperate, he realised that – *I can bring down a far bigger prey than I'd thought.*

Shaken by civil war, Mephius was like a giant whose mind and limbs no longer

operated together. The very fact that Salamand's unit had been able to remain within its territory for so long indicated how bizarre the entire situation was.

"Everyone, this is proof that General Ryucown is watching over us from the sky."



Salamand raised his fist to the heavens as he yelled. His soldiers all did the same. They were all devotees of Ryucown. There were even some among them whose bearded faces were wet with tears.

“Remember this place well. One day, guided by true chivalry, what we see will become part of our beloved Garbera.”

And then, there was Ende.

Prince Eric – who could not yet claim the title of “Grand Duke” since the coronation ceremony could not be carried out – had summoned the chief courtiers and commanders to the main palace. Among them there were also Ende’s warrior priests, whose role was to call on the guardian spirits from all the various shrines in the land.

Allion’s fleet was, even now, crossing the sea. Which implied that they were saving their reserves of ether for their air carriers and airships, and that they would soon come to anchor in Zonga’s ports. Although, if Zonga were asked about it directly, they would probably deny it point blank.

That’s the only thing in our favour – thought Eric.

It meant that they could not afford to transport soldiers by way of air. For all of its might, the Kingdom of Allion had only just come out of a large-scale war. And, with Allion being Allion, he had also heard rumors of trifling internal disturbances.

Even First Prince Kaseria’s troops were at less than their full contingent.

It was said that the king of Allion had not seemed particularly interested in Jeremie’s appeal, but had dispatched troops under Kaseria’s command at the prince’s fervent request.

A beast thirsting for blood.

So said the rumours. Kaseria Jamil enjoyed poetry and music as much as he loved women, and killed as naturally as he breathed. Rumour even claimed that he had withdrawal symptoms if he was not destroying something or slaughtering someone.

“The enemy is at about two thousand. Even if they increase their numbers, they will not go beyond double that.”

The generals were letting their ideas do the fighting across the table during the council of war.

“We’ll gather the entire army in Dairan and intercept them.”

“The entire army will be impossible. Mephius and Garbera are currently politically unstable. At a time like this, if we don’t reinforce our defences in all four directions, who knows what kind of miscreant might cross our borders.”

“Moreover,” an old admiral dressed in long-hemmed clothes blinked almost incessantly, “even if we manage to repel them, what will follow after will be tens of thousands of Allion’s troops. Is going to war really for the best?”

“The root of all this is Prince Jeremie – ah, no, sorry, he’s been stripped of his title – Jeremie. If we capture him and have him officially receive judgement, he will be recognised as a traitor against his own country. And Allion will lose just cause for intervention.”

“Just cause?” A general with a tangled mat of hair spluttered as though in amazement. “If Allion were a country that respected justice or causes, neither Holy Dytiann nor the “Silent Ruler,” Shazarn, would not have been brought to ruin. Those bastards are masters at brandishing whatever “just cause” is most convenient for them. No matter what we do, war is unavoidable!”

“The coastal countries might offer reinforcements. They’re trade nations: many of their kings will be worried about Allion gaining power in the area.”

“You want us to ally ourselves with those heathens who worship pot-bellied gods with twisted limbs? Every last one of Ende’s guardian Spirits would abandon us!”

“What are you on about at a time like this! The fate of our country is at stake!”

“It is exactly because we are in peril that we need to demonstrate our pride and dignity as a country and...”

Ende’s long history and traditions sometimes turned its people’s thought-processes a little rusty.

Prince Eric had come to understand something in this short amount of time. Up until then, the councils of war he had known had been held in tents set up on the grass-

covered plains of Dairan and had merely involved discussions of how best to slaughter the enemy, how to minimise their own losses, and where to hold the victory celebration afterwards. In other words, Eric had only ever experienced councils which were extremely simple and extremely efficient; and now, as he watched while words were tossed around before him, he could not help but find a certain humour in the contrast between how light the existence of these words was, and how heavy their impact on history would be.

Right, no matter how appalling this is, there's still something humorous about it.

"All of you," Eric stretched out a hand and broke up the courtiers' dispute which had looked like it was going to continue on endlessly.

Startled, everyone looked up towards the future grand duke, innumerable expectations and calculations flitting through them as they did so. There were people there who hoped to maintain their positions by finding favour with the next grand duke; people who wanted to see how this very young and very rustic man, who had no experience on the field except in Dairan, was going to cope with this unprecedented crisis; and people who were simply waiting impatiently, eager to go to war.

"Asking for reinforcements from the coastal countries is an excellent idea. Our ties with them go back a long way. To claim that borrowing the strength of such old friends is shameful is the same as denying our history. Is it not?"

"Aye," the retainers nodded.

Even those who had earlier dismissed them because of their "gods and whatnot" were aware that this was the only way to avert the crisis. The words of rejection they had spoken were, perhaps also because of the weight of history, something which had to be done as a matter of form.

For the time being – they had no other choice if they were to hold Allion in check. The atmosphere in the room seemed to become firmer.

"And then there's Mephius and Garbera," the young man who would be the next grand duke spoke words that left everyone astounded. "We will request reinforcements from them too." "What!"

"Mephius is being shaken by civil war. There are also signs of that in Garbera. And besides..." One of the generals abruptly stopped talking.

Troops from Garbera and Ende had clashed just a very short while ago. And it was Eric himself who had led the forces from Ende. They had valiantly set off but, in the end, Mephius had also entered the fray, leaving them no choice but to turn back. Immediately after that, wild dragons had attacked Dairan and Eric had earned renown by slaying them; but if had not been for that fact, if he had merely scurried home, he would simply have been a defeated commander and would probably have lost his candidacy for the position of grand duke.

Eric bestowed a smile upon the general.

“It’s perfectly obvious that Allion is not aiming for our country alone. Mephius and Garbera surely know that just as well as the countries by the sea do. I’m aware that they currently have their own troubles to deal with, and that we don’t know how much strength they can muster. But right now, what is important is to issue an appeal making it clear that we should share the same purpose. It will help with what’s to come.”

Once he had spoken, Eric stood up. Just as everyone else was doing the same, he continued:

“Warriors, collect swords, spears and guns. Take anything that looks usable and don’t neglect preparations when it comes to soldiers either. The civil officials will write. Naturally, you will make sure that the letters for each of the coastal countries as well as for Mephius and Garbera are individualised, and that each one is written in such a way as to strike a chord with the people of each different country. This is war. A war in which you will put your life on the line to defend your country.”

Eric was, by nature, a poor orator so the words he had just spoken had been prepared beforehand. He had not been able to completely banish his nervousness, but the speech was still effective. His gaze swept over the retainers, who all had their heads bowed before him.

“May every one of the Spirits protect us.”

“May the Spirits protect us,” everyone echoed the same words.

While Ende was still set in its ancient ways, in the Mephian territory of Birac, new blood was in the process of ushering in change.

Orba belatedly caught wind of the events surrounding Ende’s struggle for succession

and of Allion's movements. The news was already widely circulated in Solon and, since it was transmitted from there to Birac, he was also able to find out how the capital was reacting to it.

This is bad.

Orba paced around the room in Fedom's mansion which had been allocated to him.

He had been waiting and waiting in Birac and, just as he thought that the wind was finally blowing his way, the situation with Salamand and then Ende had cropped up in quick succession. Voices had only just started to rise in support of the crown prince, but he was afraid that Gil Mephius would be seen as no more than a troublemaker seeding discord in a time when difficulties were piling up and the country needed to stand united.

And Gil's situation would only get worse if Salamand were to attack one of the cities or if Allion's troops arrive in the center of the continent in response to Jeremie's appeal.

His plans were being upset from a direction he had never even dreamed of.

The general's words might not have been that much of a joke – he thought, remembering how Rogue had previously suggested that Salamander might be acting “at His Majesty's instigation”.

Of course, that was not the same as saying that Guhl had ushered Salamand in. But it was possible that Guhl Mephius was currently deliberately allowing Salamand to remain. The imperial family's reputation and prestige might take a blow because of it, but he might well feel that it was more important, at least for now, to foster the country's perception that Gil Mephius was a hindrance.

According to one of the rumours in Solon, Salamand was working in collusion with the Impostor Crown Prince. The fake Gil was working with the west and with Garbera to make Mephius fall into chaos. The origin of the rumour was unknown but it would not be surprising if the emperor were pulling the strings.

A troop of a thousand soldiers was right before him in Nedain. Orba could not move forward without first dealing with this. But if he took action now, he would be branded a traitor who took advantage of the country's difficulties to satisfy his own greedy ambitions.

“It’s a plausible story,” nodded Rogue when Orba consulted with him about it. He had, for the time being, left his vice-commander in charge of the air fleet in Nedain, and was paying his respects to Gil.

“Once you are no longer a unifying force, Your Highness, His Majesty probably intends to send out an elite force to crush Salamand. The people will then be left with the impression that the one defending the country is, after all, definitely the emperor. Even if it later leads to war with Garbera, that will only be a secondary consideration compared to civil war. And because the people are aware of Garbera’s provocative actions, in all likelihood, it will be a war which they will fully support.”

“There’s also the situation with Ende and Allion. Which means that Garbera won’t be able to start trouble easily either. If it actually comes to that.”

Garbera might prepare its weapons and turn its attention entirely to defending its own country. Which would mean that Guhl Mephius would again be seen as the one who had protected this country.

Orba had been waiting for ‘time’ to start moving, but he had never expected it to do so in such a hectic manner.

How serious is Allion about this? Will Garbera really just ignore Salamand? And what will Guhl’s next move be?

Orba spent his time anguishing. His thoughts were being pulled in too many directions. He needed to broaden his field of vision... yes, but Orba’s experiences and way of thinking could not yet catch up with this situation. Or rather, he did not find it easy to cope with the threat of the untold thousands of enemy troops that were fast approaching.

Orba was constantly immersed in thought; when he was eating, when he was receiving the periodic reports from his men, when he was attending strategy meetings, when he was defecating – constantly.

Even when he was spending time with the princess, and despite the fact that he strongly reminded himself that – *when we’re together, I really have to always pay attention* – Orba would, again and again, fail to notice that she was talking to him. And, even though he would end up thinking *Dammit!*, he still repeated the same mistake.

Yet strangely, although he expected the princess to immediately lash out angrily or

else adopt an unyieldingly distant attitude because of her fury, she did not particularly seem to mind. He wondered whether she was also exhausted of constantly giving him reminders.

“Are you listening, Your Highness?”

“Yeah,” Orba answered, looking as though he had just snapped awake.

‘Luckily’, the person standing nearby was not a fourteen-year-old girl, but rather Pashir.

“How are things going with the new recruits?”

“For now, in terms of suspicious behaviour... If we’re talking about whether they can be used as soldiers, then they have started cooperating but, well... if they were sent to battle, about half of them would run away.”

“Oh?”

“They were temporarily carried away by the heroic tale of the imperial crown prince who revived from the dead. I’m sure they were thinking that if they could work near you, they might also become heroes. But in practice, there are already more than a hundred who have run away because of how strict the training is.”

Pashir uncompromisingly looked reality straight in the eye. Yet he noticed that Orba was looking at him with a half-amused expression.

“Is there something you are wanting to say?”

“Why does a man who’s so far-sighted not run away himself?”

Eh? – said the expression on Pashir’s face.

“We’re not in a situation where I’m holding Mira or your gladiator friends hostage anymore. You’d do well to escape while you can. Or is the payoff for being an imperial guard worth losing your life for?”

“... Who knows. But then, I do not think you would get into a fight that you do not believe you can win, Your Highness.”

“I wonder,” said Orba as he sunk back into thought.

In terms of looking reality in the face, Folker, whom he had fought at Tolinea, was the same. In all likelihood, both he and Pashir had reasoned out that Gil Mephius would only destroy himself if things stayed as they were...

“Should I take a trip to Solon instead?” Orba muttered and Pashir gave him a startled look. It was rare for him to look that surprised.

“That was a joke,” said Orba, getting up from his seat.

Later on, after he had gotten changed and headed outside, he thought back on it. Was that really a joke? His words had been unexpected even to himself.

Incidentally, in this case, “getting changed” did not only mean changing his clothes but fitting himself out with a black breastplate, iron gauntlets and greaves, and placing an iron mask on his face. Before leaving Apta to fight, Orba had summoned the master blacksmith Sodan and had him forge something that would go suitably with his tiger mask. So what he wore now was different from what he had in the west.

He would go around throughout Birac in his separate guises as crown prince and imperial guard. He trusted the reports from his companions, but the ‘quality’ of information obtained first-hand was different. Such was Orba’s belief. He was willing to expend great effort in widening his field of vision even if only by a fraction; and besides, although he had decided to wait, it was not in his nature to just do nothing. Moving around also helped to relieve his impatience, if only by a bit.

After having walked around the barracks, Orba went to watch the airship units’ training. One of the company commanders in Rogue’s Dawnlight Wings Division was a demon of an instructor and was working the men hard. As for the ships and carriers, many of them had been supplied by the Haman firm, so there were some among them that had been made in Garbera.

Although that was probably not the reason why –

Oh. Attracted by the airships, of course.

Orba felt a presence behind him. It quietly crept up to him. For a short moment, it hesitated about what to do.

And as a result...

“The prince was just asking about you.”

“Kyah!”

At a distance close enough to feel the body heat from his back, Vileena Owell let out a small scream. Turning his head over his shoulder, he saw her hurriedly try to hide a stick which was rolling about on the ground. She had probably dropped it in surprise.

“Do you strike people down when you’re bored, Princess?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Red to the tips of her ears, Vileena did her best to toss her shoulders up jauntily. She was probably embarrassed from having been caught in a surprise attack and from letting out a most uncharacteristic scream.

“Have you come to train the soldiers again?”

“Humph, don’t make fun of me.”

Vileena said with a huffy expression as she plopped down next to him. Together, they watched the columns of airships cross the sky.

Although the situation was as it was, Orba felt that her warmth beside him was oddly comforting.

CHAPTER 5

THE PRINCESS' LONG DAY

PART 1

Earlier that morning, after having gotten up and finished a light breakfast, Vileena had gone to the desk in her room.

She was back in good health. Following Theresia's advice, she had rested earlier than normal, and the medicine that Layla had brought back from the market had done its job.

She opened a book and started reading poetry out loud. It was a recent habit of hers. When she had previously welcomed Taúlia's princess, Esmena Bazgan, in Apta, she had realised that she truly was nothing more than an ignorant little girl. Even now, she still felt mortified by the conviction that if Ineli Mephius had not happened to be present to help, Esmena would have spent a tedious trip.

Because of that, she became driven by the idea that she needed to rapidly acquire culture. No sooner was it said than done. She asked Theresia to go buy books of Mephian verse, which was what she was now reading aloud.

According to her, "I become too engrossed and forget about reality when I read in silence."

Or so she said but, going by what Theresia had witnessed more than once, it was actually only because she would otherwise fall asleep.

Well, in a sense, that was also "forgetting about reality".

This morning too she started reading poetry in a brisk voice.

It's strange how everything sounds like a war poem when the princess is the one reading it – Theresia thought while listening as she sorted the clothes on the shelves.

They had only been scheduled to be away for a few days when they left Solon. And somehow or another, here they were going to Nedain, Apta, Birac and all over

Mephius. Theresia was flawless in her duties and prepared clothes for the princess for every possible environment, but now that she had no leeway to do so, she had no choice but to make do with what she had. Normally, as there were tailors and dressmakers catering exclusively to aristocrats wherever one went, Theresia only had to see a sample of their work, choose who to place an order with, take delivery of the clothes she had purchased, and give instructions about how to adjust them.

After less than ten minutes, she could no longer hear the princess' voice. She turned around to look, thinking that today it had been exceptionally fast, but, contrary to her expectations, Vileena's eyes were wide open. Her gaze was not however directed at her book but outside the window.

It was not a case of her concentration becoming unfocused and drifting away. On the contrary, her expression was rapt. It was a scene of such ethereal beauty that it seemed on the verge of dissolving in the morning sun.

Although caught in a feeling of wanting to admire it a little longer, Theresia nevertheless called out –

“Princess.”

“...O Mighty Winds, artless children of Minel! Bridle sorcery's rampage, banish to the ruins of time the sparks of these senseless ceremonies of steel. Thou who now brushes against my cheeks will cross the pale, snow-capped summits and to the ends of the world soon...”

“Princess.”

“I was just getting into it. Don't interrupt!”

Vileena turned around, looking thoroughly displeased, but Theresia had a suggestion –

“Studying hard is excellent. But staying locked away in your room is stuffy, isn't it? Why not go for a little walk?”

Bathed in sunlight for the first time in several days, Vileena left the mansion. She had been secluding herself in her room not only because she had been thinking about

something, but also because she judged that while Salamand continued to cause trouble in Mephius, a Garberan princess walking around as she pleased would simply stir things up unnecessarily among the people and soldiers of Birac.

Her intentions were admirable but, unfortunately, her personality made it impossible for her emotions to settle down when she had to stay still in one place.

“If you say so, Theresia, then... well, I suppose I have no choice,” she had said casually while putting on her cloak; but actually, she was feeling embarrassed at having had Theresia see through her.

Now then...

Trying to look as serious as possible, she firmly set her expression and, walking like the guards on patrol did, first went on a round of the mansion’s surroundings.

Vileena’s steps were light. Nor was it only today; she always walked at a fast pace, which made things hard for Theresia, who followed behind her. Today however she simply did her best to keep up and did not particularly make any comment.

And so, just like that, they circled around the entire mansion in no time at all. Following which, it suddenly occurred to Vileena to go and see Krau.

She should also have arrived in Birac recently along with the fleet. She would almost certainly have found a discreet corner of the air carrier dock and would be lazing around, her large body imposingly stretched out. Contrary to expectation however, as soon as she reached the docks with its characteristic smell of oil and heated engines, she heard Krau’s voice.

“Hey, hurry up! Guys who sleepwalk their way through work don’t get to eat, you know. Over there too! Have you finished checking the engines? What do you mean, you’re starting now? Uh-huh, you’re going to be in for a really long day. Hurry up and get it done before the sun sets.”

Her usually lethargic figure was running around faster than seemed possible given her plump body while she continued to hurl instructions about servicing and assembling the carriers. She must have been at it for a while since she was drenched in sweat from head to toe.

Upon asking about it, it appeared that Zaj Haman would be visiting the mansion that

afternoon.

Zaj being Zaj, there was no question that he would come to see the air carriers. If nothing else, because he had only just donated three new-model air carriers in celebration of the prince's return. Krau was conscious of the fact that if the ships were poorly maintained, or even if they were noticeably dirty, she was the one he would get angry at.

Because Krau had once been a slave working for Zaj, she was steeped to the bones in the awareness that he was particularly strict when it came to air carriers. Taken another way, however, it showed that Zaj was no longer her master. Nonetheless, since he was her mentor when it came to ships, she was now working so hard on maintenance that she looked like a different person. Their relationship was not one that could be severed even if the master and slave were to switch places.

"Ah, look! That stuff there is in the way so you can't see the crest of the Haman firm. Why is it that you don't do anything unless you're told to? Can't you use your heads to think!?"

Hearing Krau's shrill voice as she earnestly bustled around, Vileena smiled and, not wanting to interrupt, she left hastily.

Anyway – she would soon need to discuss something face-to-face with Krau. But that conversation was not so urgent that she couldn't wait for Krau to calm down.

Next, Vileena went to find Hou Ran. As with Krau, she did not need to search to know where to go. Even so...

"Oh my!" Theresia exclaimed in surprise, and Vileena was equally taken aback.

Just as expected, Hou Ran was in the dragon pen. She was, additionally, inside a cage where medium-sized dragons were kept. Terrified-looking slaves were standing nearby, holding a three-metre tall whetting board while Ran guided the dragon to sharpen its claws.

Again, just like Krau, she moved as nimbly as could be. She was still covered in bandages, but she did not seem to be suffering from any after-effects of her injuries. According to what Vileena had heard, Ran had shielded a dragon from armed soldiers by standing in front of their guns.

Amazing – Vileena was openly admiring. Besides which, she was also happy to see Ran safely taking care of the dragons as usual.

“Is that you, Vileena?” Ran suddenly called out, despite the fact that they were still far away and that she could not see what was outside the cage.

“It is incredible that you can tell.”

“These children have finally learnt to remember the princess’ face,” said Ran.

That really did not explain anything, but Vileena decided to just go along with it for now. She knew that if she asked about it, the answer would just leave her even more confused.

Ran still had her back turned towards the princess and continued working. From what Vileena could see, the dragons were just like dogs. Be it the Baians, the one-horned Yunions, or the Golls with their reddish-brown scales, all of them happily followed Ran’s instructions. No matter how many times she saw it, it was still a startling scene.

Garbera, the princess’ native country, also had dragoon units. It could not, however, be said to be as proficient at handling them as Mephius or the west were. And so every single one of Ran’s movements appeared to her to be a miracle of skill.

“Ran, you really understand the dragons’ feelings very clearly, don’t you?”

“Who knows,” Ran answered curtly. “The ‘voice’ that I hear is limited to what I can make out of it. I can’t read these children’s feelings without ever making any mistakes. That’s why I try to look at it in different ways and spend a lot of time with them, so that I can maybe understand their feelings just a little bit more.”

“I see,” deeply impressed by the words, Vileena nodded profoundly.

At the same time, Theresia had, for a while now, been holding her handkerchief to her nose and had her eyes turned away from the dragons. In truth, she was impatient to get away from them as quickly as possible.

A short while elapsed.

“Is there something with my face?” Ran asked abruptly.

“Eh?”

“Orba’s been staring at my face recently.”

“I-Is that so?” Vileena blushed in embarrassment.

“Has something changed about me without my noticing?”

“There is nothing particularly different from usual.”

Perhaps exasperated by that far from insightful answer, Theresia stepped in to help.

“You are so beautiful, Miss Ran, that I’m sure there are many gentlemen who admire you.”

“Do you think so?” Ran tilted her head while still giving the slaves instructions about the sharpening board.

Theresia seemed somewhat amused. “Could it be you cannot read men’s feelings either?”

“Orba isn’t complicated,” said Ran. “I can usually tell what he’s thinking just by looking at his face. But sometimes, very rarely, his feelings are even harder to understand than those of these children are. He really is a nuisance.”

“Doesn’t he wear a mask though...”

“Oh, that’s just for show. What’s a nuisance about him is that it’s not just a mask, it’s like he’s got something concealing his entire body.”

“Not just Sir Orba, aren’t people often like that? Miss Ran, just like you try your utmost to spend time with the dragons so as to understand them, humans also put in a lot effort to understand one another; they use time, consideration, and a lot of seemingly idle conversations to do so. And in that way, they strip away the mask and the pieces of armour one by one.”

“I see.”

In Ran’s own way, it looked as though she had acknowledged something from Theresia’s words. She nodded ever so slightly.

That was when Vileena noticed something at Ran's waist. She was sure that she did not remember Ran wearing any kind of ornament before.

"Ran, you have a flute?"

"Orba gave it to me," Ran answered immediately. She had casually stuck the foreign-looking flute in her belt. Orba had gone with the prince to fight in the west, so it was probably something like a souvenir. "How thoughtful. So different from the prince," Theresia muttered as an aside. Vileena pretended not to hear her.

"A western flute? I've heard about them. They say that they have a very expressive sound."

"I can't play it. But Krau plays beautifully."

"She does?" Although aware that it was a little rude, Vileena could not hide the surprise on her face.

For some reason, Ran gave a faint smile, "Krau can do anything. She's good at singing, dancing, and gambling. She said that she'd teach me one of these days, but I doubt if I can learn to play like her."

Thinking about it, Vileena and Ran had a strange connection. They had both ridden in the mountains after dark to go searching for the prince. They had travelled together by ship from Nedain to Apta. Vileena had heard that she had been seized by Apta's soldiers shortly afterwards and that, at around the same time as Orba had saved Vileena from that mysterious attack, the prince had returned, rescuing Ran.

At the moment however, that was not what had left a deep impression on Vileena.

Right, a flute.

Enthusiasm flared up within her. She did not believe that she would become a person of refined culture simply from continuing to recite poetry. Or rather, she did not feel that she had any affinity for *that*.

Being able to play a musical instrument was definitely befitting of the status of a lady.

Alright, next up is the flute. I'll stop with poetry and start studying that instead.

Theresia had gone to the kitchens for awhile to prepare for the midday meal. As with clothes, she would need to try out all sorts to find something that suited the princess' tastes.

Once she was alone, Vileena was seized with the desire to go and watch the airships. As it happened, units were performing flight training. When she headed over that way, she happened to catch sight of Orba, the Imperial Guard. Seeing his back turned towards her, she stood still for a moment. With perfect timing, a stick rolled underfoot. And as for why the princess thought it was "perfect timing"... well anyway, Vileena picked it up.

The plan was to creep up quietly then yell "Prepare yourself!" as she swung towards the mask. Naturally, she did not actually intend to hit him. She only wanted to surprise the young man who was praised as a hero in both Mephius and the west, but he easily noticed her presence and she ended screaming like a girl.

Although she was, of course, feeling embarrassed; instead of going away from Orba, who was standing quite still, she brazened it out and instead sat down and spoke –

"You seem to be as busy as ever."

"Well, more or less."

Orba's answer was vague. Vileena would have feigned displeasure, but his response suddenly reminded her of her earlier conversation with Ran, and she unintentionally burst out laughing.

"What is it?"

"No nothing. Ran said that your feelings are sometimes even harder to read than those of the dragons, is all."

"Is that so?"

Orba looked as though he did not know how to answer, but Vileena's next words made him gulp.

"Thinking about it, the way that Ran and the dragons understand each other without

words is a lot like you and Prince Gil. Even though I have hardly ever seen you in the same place together, and even less talking together, you always seem to share the same understanding. Put plainly, you are very close, aren't you?"

"No, that... There's a lot about His Highness that even I don't understand. And since I don't have any room to ask questions, I really just follow orders without understanding them."

"In the west too?"

"Eh?"

The story of how Orba had played an active part in the west as a hero in an iron mask had started to spread in Apta and in Birac, and Vileena spoke of what she had heard.

"...That was naturally only because I had His Highness' instructions."

Vileena nodded along as though in admiration, but ended up giving a long sigh.

"There is no denying that His Highness is very skilled when it comes to warfare. Still, he really seems to believe in fooling his friends to deceive his enemies. Even now, does he have a plan, does he not, who knows?"

"..."

"But, although it wasn't what Ran was talking about, I've come to understand just a little bit more. These are also Ran's words, but I think that he is fundamentally uncomplicated. It's just that the way he presents himself is baffling and... oh?"

"Is something wrong?"

At Orba's words, Vileena looked puzzled. For a moment, her thoughts had become entangled and she no longer knew who she was talking about; was it about Orba or Prince Gil? Ran's assessment of "fundamentally uncomplicated but sometimes impossible to understand" perfectly applied to both of them. Orba of course, had no idea of what she was thinking.

"Since we're talking of understanding, Princess, how do you see His Highness now?" Orba enquired, impelled by curiosity. "Do you think there is a way to break the current deadlock?"

“That’s...” Vileena started to speak then stopped.

Airships were revolving overhead. The units were all those of Winged Dragon officers, so naturally, it was very different from the half-baked training she had watched before. As she looked towards it, she said –

“For now, let’s keep it a secret.” She put a finger to her lips and winked.

“W-Why?”

“I’m imitating His Highness. Oh, speaking of imitating, could I ask you to pass on a message to him?”

Vileena stood up as she spoke and straightened the hem of her skirt. The gaze she turned towards Orba was oddly clear. It somehow reminded him of the radiance of Lake Soma which he had briefly seen in the west.

“If it pleases you but... what on earth...?”

“Please tell him that Princess Vileena of Garbera is a ‘liar’.” Vileena smiled lightly.

Orba could not read her meaning. Borrowing Ran’s words again, a realisation suddenly dawned on him: *Women... Every last one of them is a nuisance and harder to understand than dragons.*

Vileena did not intend to commit the same indiscretions again. Well, actually, what she was going to do from there on was probably indiscretion incarnate, but at any rate, she did not plan to betray again those who were close to her. And so, she explained things frankly to Theresia and Layla.

She held nothing back about the plan she had secretly been pondering these past few days and about what her movements would be in the close – or rather, the immediate – future.

“I object.”

“Theresia...”

The lady's maid who had been by her side since Vileena was born quietly shook her head.

"Do not worry, I will not say anything about my position on this matter. Thank you for having told us Princess, however, you will soon be fifteen years old. I will not interfere with what you have thought of and decided on by yourself."

"Thank you, Theresia."

The princess' face suddenly brightened. On the other hand, Layla's expression clouded with unease. She was just about to say something but Vileena seized the initiative.

"Layla, please remain in Birac."

Layla caught her breath. The princess, of course, knew nothing of her circumstances, however, she supposed that there must have been some significant reason for her family to live in the west despite the fact that it had no diplomatic relations with Mephius. Because of that, she thought that she should not bring Layla with her any further, to where she would now be heading.

"It's alright. You can pretend that you did not hear this conversation, since I have no intention of dragging you into trouble, Layla."

"B-But, Princess... Rather than worrying about someone like me, won't you be putting yourself in considerable danger?"

"That's..." Vileena seemed to want to make some kind of excuse but then, in the next moment, she looked a little embarrassed at her reaction and smiled. "I'm fully aware of that, but I will still do it."

"Is it for that person's sake?" Layla's sudden question was almost a shriek. For a second, the princess looked puzzled.

"That person?"

"His Highness Crown Prince Gil Mephius."

Ah – the princess nodded, her eyes lowered, as though having understood something. Just like a moment earlier, she was about to say something but then shut her lips. From her manner, it seemed that it was not that she was faltering and hesitating, but that

she was perplexed as to how to explain her answer to another person. After a moment...

“For my native land, for the land that I decided to live and die in, for His Highness, for all the people... if I was to say that, none of it would be a lie. But, if you were to ask me for one specific person I was doing it for, in the end, it is probably for my own sake. Because I am aware of that, because I do not want to have regrets later, I will follow my decision through.”

While the princess was explaining, Layla shook her head like an unruly child saying “no”, dishevelled her long hair. Tears trickled from her eyes. Thinking that she was worried for her safety, Vileena’s heart, of course, also tightened.



“Afterwards, I will definitely return here.” There was no trace of hesitation in her firm promise.

However, Layla still shook her head, and her slender shoulders continued to tremble, but she was unable to say anything further.

PART 2

“Why do you torment me so relentlessly, O Princess, I who am so weak?”

It was at some six hundred metres above ground that this cry of lamentation could be heard. Anyone would think that a beautiful but unfortunate maiden was being led to an unjust sacrificial ceremony, however it was only Krau who was weeping and wailing as she operated the steering apparatus. Even the crying was fake. It was perfectly clear that she was inwardly lamenting but, unfortunately, her tears were not that accommodating.

“I’m sorry.” Still, Vileena meekly apologised and patted the large, hunched up back. “But it isn’t to torment you. It’s because I rely on you, Krau.”

“The result is the same! I’ll definitely be harshly scolded by His Highness. I’ll be whipped, and have my meals taken away, and I’ll definitely be suffer indignities I can’t even mention.”

“Now, now,” while Krau was wailing tragically, Theresia’s voice was utterly carefree. She was not use to air carriers and, for a while now, she had been gazing entranced at the part of the sky which could be seen from the bridge. “I do not believe that gentleman would do any such thing. An actress as talented as yourself only needs to put on a show; just insist that the princess tricked you and it will be fine.”

“What do you mean, a ‘show’?”

What the... Krau wondered suspiciously while she continued to sob. The lady’s maid, who was always the first to criticise the princess whenever she acted like this, was this time acting like her accomplice.

As she made clear when she flat-out told the princess that she objected, Theresia was, of course, far from whole-heartedly approving of this. However, this time she had been informed beforehand. Which was infinitely preferable to having the princess sneak around in the shadows, like she had the time when she went alone to the west from Apta. Because Theresia wished to allow for Vileena’s personality, she was determined that, this time, she would accompany her to the end.

They had embarked on this air carrier about two hours earlier. It had been the middle of the night when Vileena had sent a messenger to summon Krau to the mansion.

“I would like you to fly a ship to Nedain,” the princess had requested.

She had claimed that it was a visit to encourage the soldiers on the front lines. If they left late at night, they would arrive in the morning. She also asked that a ship capable of covering long distances should be prepared, so that they would not need to stop at any relay-station along the way.

“At this hour?”

Krau had naturally had her doubts, but Vileena had calmly answered that –

“I only just thought of it.”

To act on something she had only just thought of was certainly very like the princess. Besides, she had added that she had the prince’s permission. Although there many points worthy of suspicion, since Theresia was with her, Krau had decided that – *well, it probably isn’t a lie.*

She chose an air carrier that could carry no more than four or five people. Nor did it have any cabins. The reason why the hull was so large was because it had a large loading capacity for ether. It was not a type built for speed, but it had a long cruising range. It was a ship that was mainly used by garrison guards patrolling around the city’s circumference.

The princess personally negotiated with the airport’s supervisor. Just as with Krau, she claimed to have the crown prince’s permission.

It was already known within Birac that Crown Prince Gil and Vileena always acted decisively. So the fact that his heroic accomplishments had been widely spread about, in this situation, had turned into a handicap for Orba.

And thus, when they had been flying for about two hours, and had travelled far enough that it was too late to turn back, the princess had said confidently:

“This is a secret from the prince.”

Krau’s lamentations were not purely a show.

Although she kept nervously looking behind them to see if any pursuers had been sent out from Birac, in the end, the ship arrived in sight of their allies’ encampment just as

planned, sometime close to dawn.

General Odyne Lorgo's troops had now increased to about a thousand five hundred, so the camp was spread out. At their back they had Birac's huge port, so they did not need to worry about replenishing supplies. As though showing off to Nedain, they were ostentatiously staying in position.

Rumour had it that they occasionally summoned the newly re-organised units in Birac to have them practice with swords and guns. This was, in part, to train the new soldiers where they could smell the air from near a battlefield, but it was also to keep Nedain in check.

There was a temporary landing site for air carriers. It was on a level hilltop and all that had been built was a track to allow goods to be transported easily, but Vileena ordered them to land there.

"That's an unusual ship." Odyne, who had gotten up early, was intrigued by the ship that landed in a cloud of dust.

Because ships frequently came from Birac carrying messages, supplying provisions, or supplementing soldiers, the camp constantly saw ships land and take off. But even for him, it was his first time seeing a ship of that model.

Not even Odyne could possibly have predicted that the Garberan princess, Vileena Owell, would alight from it.

Confused, he hurriedly rushed over on horseback and scrupulously bowed in greeting to the princess.

Odyne felt as though he still could not believe it even when he saw her up close; but it was not until after the greetings, and once he had heard the princess' purpose, that he was struck dumb in the real sense of the phrase.

"I will go to Nedain from here."

"To Nedain? But, Princess... w-why do you wish to go there?" Odyne could not conceal his confusion. He wondered if there had been some kind of communication between Birac and the current enemy, Solon, but there had been no such news.

"Is that somehow improper? I came from Garbera to become the crown prince of

Mephius' wife. There is nothing to be bothered about in my going anywhere within Mephian territory."

There was no way he could not be bothered by it. From the princess' manner, Odyne could more or less sense that she did not have Gil Mephius' permission. He was going to immediately get in touch with Birac when –

"Odyne, even if you dig your heels in the ground, it won't work," the princess said with an unusual lack of expression. When the innocence vanished from her expression, her originally clear-cut features gave her a surprisingly adult appearance. "I am still a princess of Garbera. Are you, a mere Mephian general, going to defy me?" She went so far as to say.

Vileena ordered him to send a messenger to Nedain to inform them of her visit.

"I cannot do it."

"Is that so? In that case, I will fly an airship and enter Nedain alone. It will be your responsibility if the enemy shoots me down in error and I lose my life because of it. There's no help for it."

Odyne was puzzled by the violence of her words. In the end, he obeyed her order. As she herself had said, for all that she was the crown prince's fiancée, she was still a princess of Garbera. He could not restrain her.

While waiting for the other party's reply, the princess seated herself in a corner of the encampment.

What's she planning to do?

The soldiers were whispering together close enough for her to be able to hear them.

Maybe she's seen that we're at a disadvantage and wants to run away?

Weren't there Garberan soldiers who've invaded Mephian territory? She could be intending on joining up with them and go back to her country...

Impossible, the princess is...

The anecdote of how Vileena Owell had gone alone to the west and thwarted Mephius'

invasion was widely told. And, since that coincided with the purpose of Crown Prince Gil's war, the general tendency was to hold the princess up as a heroine. So the soldiers were naturally confused. Among them, there were some voices that suggested that –

Maybe it's some kind of plan set up by His Highness Prince Gil.

Vileena waited some distance apart. She sat on a camp stool with her knees pressed together. Behind her, as quiet and still as a shadow, was Theresia.

When the sun was nearly halfway across the sky, an airship arrived from Nedain flying a flag of intersecting white and black. The flag of a messenger. He came with the message that Jairus Abigoal, lord of Nedain, was prepared to receive the Garberan princess.

Good – as soon as she heard it, Vileena rose from her seat.

“Princess, are you really going?”

“Don't make me repeat myself.” Vileena curtly responded to Odyne's final confirmation of her intentions.

News of the princess' visit naturally caused no small amount of confusion within Nedain. The long face-off had exhausted the resources of both the people and the soldiers. Whereupon, Vileena Owell had suddenly requested to come over from the enemy side.

“It might be a trap,” some suggested in a whisper.

Crown Prince Gil was known to make use of all sorts of clever schemes to throw the enemy into disarray. He had done so both against Ryucown and when repelling Taúlia's surprise attack on Apta.

Those however were the achievements of the “real” Gil, so to speak. The fundamental premise of this war was that the “current” Gil was a different person, yet he too had overcome Folker's army and gained victory with just a small number of soldiers. Things were complicated in the extreme but, at any rate, they could not afford to be careless. However –

If this is the real Garberan princess we'll be receiving... Jairus had a faint hope that this stagnant situation might finally start to move again.

Currently, there was also that man, Salamand, who was causing trouble within Mephius in the name of “rescuing the princess”. *The sooner they get sent back to their own country, the better* – thought Jairus.

However, although the response he had given was that “we will receive her,” the lord of Nedain would not believe it was real until he saw her with his own eyes.

“It really *is* the princess herself.”

The messenger airship was returning. Jairus, who had snatched the binoculars away from a soldier and caught sight of the princess and a woman who looked like a lady's maid on board the ship, was momentarily speechless. He had met Vileena before when she had come to Nedain. At that time, she had been a guest visiting from Solon. Now, she was coming from Birac, which was opposing that same Solon.

She sure is busy.

Jairus was so well pleased that passing and sarcastic thought of his that he repeated when he went to meet her face to face.

“Greetings, Your Royal Highness. I did not hope to ever see you again. Since you have been flying around all over Mephius, you must be terribly busy.”

He spoke from the entrance of the Abigoal mansion.

“I am very obliged to you for meeting me in person, Lord Abigoal.”

“What are you saying? Truly, it seems that our fates are somehow connected, Princess.”

Jairus received her with a smile but was far from bearing no grudges towards Princess Vileena. When she had visited from Solon, he was forced to look after her as a guest; and then she had outmanoeuvred Jairus by pretending to return to Solon but instead going to Apta. A battle had then occurred near the border with a western army and she had gone missing. At the time, Jairus' head had been spinning so much he thought he was on the verge of collapse; he could not imagine what kind of reprimand he would receive from His Majesty the Emperor.

What had saved Jairus was that Nabarl, despite being in a position of overwhelming superiority, had lost the battle and found himself bearing the full brunt of the blame.

However – *look at the princess now* – she stood before him, smiling modestly. In the end, she was just a young girl of fourteen or fifteen. She had probably admired those musty old heroes' tales and had thrown her weight about valiantly, only to come scuttling back without having accomplished a thing as soon as she realised that she was at a disadvantage. Thinking about it like that, he had the pleasant feeling that she was dancing in the palm of his hand.

And therefore, he was able to ask without restraint, “were you not pleased with His Highness' impostor?”

“Lord Abigoal, are you suspecting me of being an impostor?” Vileena asked with an unexpectedly sorrowful appearance.

“Oh my, no indeed. What we have here is the noble-minded Princess Vileena choosing the path of righteousness.”

At which point, Boyce Abigoal appeared. Since the situation was one in which battle might break out at any moment, he was wearing armour. He had a single woman in tow.

“I believe this is your first time meeting my son?” Jairus introduced Boyce to the princess.

After they had exchanged careful greetings, Vileena's eyes alighted on the woman behind him.

“This person is...”

“My future wife,” Boyce announced triumphantly.

Seeing how Jairus frowned slightly, it appeared that father and son were not entirely in agreement on this matter.

Vileena gave a slight bow of her head and greeted the woman too. She returned the greeting in accordance with proper etiquette and gave her name as Louise, but both her eyes and expression seemed lifeless.

I see, so she is...

Vileena kept her hand clasped in hers for so long that the Abigoal father and son found it unnatural.

“Lord Abigoal.”

“What is it?”

Jairus felt startled. Her upturned eyes, that looked as though they were testing him, shone strangely.

“I am sorry to say this when you have come to greet me, but I am thinking of leaving at once. I wish to go to Solon immediately.”

PART 3

It was after dawn when news of Vileena's flight reached Orba's ears. At first, he could not understand what had happened. He even wondered if an enemy spy hadn't sneaked in and kidnapped the princess.

However, as his surroundings grew brighter, his sight became correspondingly clearer and, bit-by-bit, he received more accurate inform and was able to digest it. Vileena Owell, along with her lady's maid, Theresia, had boarded a ship and, with Krau at the helm, they had flown in the direction of Nedain. Given that it was a ship with a long cruising range, they had almost certainly reached the Nedain area without needing to replenish their ether. Their destination was, of course, obvious.

"Shall we give chase?" Asked the air force commander from Rogue's division.

Orba's feeling however was that it was – *already too late*.

And, as expected, an airship arrived in the afternoon from the direction of Nedain, carrying on board a messenger from Odyne's camp. He said that the princess, having alighted at the encampment, had shaken off any attempts from Odyne and the others to restrain her and, after both parties had sent messengers to one another, had entered Nedain.

When Orba heard about this, there were a few other people in the room, Gowen included.

What's she up to? Since having been informed about it at dawn, Orba had felt sick at heart and helpless.

He had constantly had the impression that what with Salamand, Ende, and Allion, the net was slowly but visibly tightening around him and leaving him isolated.

And on top of that, Vileena, who should have been an ally, had gone and acted on her own. *Didn't you say that you were leaving this war to me?* His temper flared up unbidden.

Orba – On receiving a glance from Gowen, he realised that his inner feelings were showing in his expression. The former overseer of slaves had given him advice previously: since from here on, he would have to thoroughly deceive not only those

around him but also the entire country and every person who had anything to do with Mephius, Orba's 'face' as a private individual would be nothing but a hindrance.

In other words, he could not act on his thoughts alone. The burden he shouldered was too heavy, so much so that even taking a single step was cause for hesitation.

Although he understood that, his feelings were not so easy to curb.

Even calling someone a liar and a coward...

Actually, "liar" and "coward" were Orba's own words about himself when he had been second-guessing the princess' evaluation of him, but leaving that aside for now...

"Liar."

"What?"

With Orba abruptly blurting out something nonsensical, Gowen reverted back to his expression "from the old days".

No, nothing – Orba shook his head while continuing his train of thought.

Right, a "liar" was it? He inwardly realised. That was what Princess Vileena had told the masked Imperial Guard Orba less than a few days ago. It had been a message to Crown Prince Gil Mephius. *Huh, now I remember it. Orba was supposed to pass it on to the prince.*

He felt like a fool. He should have noticed at the time. When it came to carefully observing hostile opponents, Orba demonstrated unparalleled powers of concentration; as he took note of every one of their actions, even down to their words and unplanned gestures, in order to see through their weaknesses and intentions. But when the opponent was a fourteen-year-old girl, he was completely lacking.

If he had to deceive a multitude of people, then Vileena was undoubtedly one of them.

I forgot all about it.

In a way, it could be seen as the princess' revenge. She had deserted Orba just as he had once fled from all that had been burdening him.

But in Vileena's case, she wouldn't have run away. Even if he held nothing but hatred towards her, that was still the one thing he could asserted with certainty. When she moved, it was to fight.

Since things had come to this, he wanted to be able to understand what she would do next.

"It couldn't be that..." He wondered.

Eei – the wave of his emotions rippled out in different directions and he found it impossible to calm down. He was seized with the impulse to slam his fist hard against a wall.

"Gowen."

"Aye."

"It's already too late to hide the fact that Princess Vileena has gone, isn't it?"

"Since she went through General Odyne's camp, it will be impossible to stop all of the soldiers from talking."

"Then have it been known that when I – when Gil Mephius heard of her departure, his only reaction was to say 'Is that so?'"

It was a ridiculous order.

However, if it were known that the princess had selfishly taken action and that the prince had lost his composure because of it, the soldiers' morale would plummet to rock bottom. He had to let it be believed, to the very end, that the princess' flight had not had a great effect on him, or else that she had acted with his approval.

Once everyone had left the room though...

"Shit!"

... Orba was finally able to slam his fist into the wall to his heart's content.

He felt cold and numb to the bone. It was no longer only hatred that filled his heart. It was nothing so simple. He bitterly regretted that his own impatience at the current

situation had been seen through. He even felt some sympathy for the princess' position as, had it been him, he might well have done the same thing.

Still, calmly analysing things and coolly observing what happened from here on was a completely different matter.

His heart was chilled. The warmth he had felt at his side had already vanished and gone far away. It had only been fleeting.

Who could even say for sure that it was still anywhere in this world?

Roan, his mother, Alice, and even Shique – the people who had been breathing by his side as though it were the most natural thing in the world had, in an instant, lost their warmth and been laid to rest, cold.

Orba ground his teeth hard.

Recently, she had constantly been having the same dream.

It was shrouded in shadows and there was a beast-like smell.

She screamed and struggled to escape. But the shadow tirelessly flew towards her.

It was undoubtedly a beast.

Its blazing eyes gleamed with desire and, from within its open maw, fangs glistening with saliva waited to tear through her tender skin.

In the end, her hands and feet could no longer move.

All she could do was scream endlessly.

Overwhelmed by the omens of death and destruction, her very mind lost the freedom of thought. She knew that soon, her flesh would be destroyed.

Just before it happened, a fierce crash of thunder roared.

It was a gunshot.

She did not know who had shot the bullet but the shadowy beast staggered and fell, and soon, it had disappeared.

The terror that had utterly filled her body and mind also gradually faded away, like the ebbing of the tide.

Before she realised it, the sun was shining brightly down from above her.

It was like a completely different world from earlier. A cool breeze brought the sound of a ringing temple bell to her ears.

Men and women that she was acquainted with were lined up on either side of her. All of them were smiling. And whenever their eyes met, they called out their blessings to her.

“Congratulations.”

“Congratulations, Layla.”

Oh right – Layla realised – today was her wedding ceremony.

Thank you – she answered in return to each smiling face, happy and proud as she walked by in her pure white wedding dress.

At the point she was walking towards, amidst the shower of petals, her bridegroom was waiting. He was an honest and sincere young man. To amuse Layla, he would sometimes tell her jokes – something he was not used to – but immediately afterwards, he would always turn bright red. When it came to work, he closely resembled her obstinate father. She did not think that was why she was attracted to him. It was simply because she was convinced that they could become a couple that was just like her parents, who were always so affectionate with each other.

Her bridegroom was also smiling. Layla’s fingers brushed against his outstretched hand.

But, just before she could take it, the bridegroom’s expression suddenly turned dark and the arm that Layla’s hand should have wrapped around was instead used to thrust the bride away.

She staggered back. It was so abrupt that she was left dumbfounded.

“Why?” She asked, staring at her bridegroom whose smile had vanished without a trace.

Or at least, that was what she tried to do, but her voice would not come out. Instead –

“Why?” She was asked in return. “Why are your clothes torn to shreds? Your wedding dress should be as white as snow, why is it filthy with blood instead?”

Startled, Layla looked down at herself.

It was just as he had said. Her clothes were ripped all over, exposing her skin. And the area around her chest was stained a deep red. Although it must have been clinging to her until just now, as soon as Layla laid eyes on the blood, it reverted back to liquid and slowly dripped down her wedding dress; before long, it was trickling to the ground from between her legs.

The bridegroom pointed at the puddle of blood pooling at her feet.

“You’ve been defiled,” he said. “Leave, this is no place for you to be. Leave, defiled bride. Leave, filthy whore!”

There was another scream.

It was so very loud that she wanted to cover her ears, and did not notice that it was coming from her until her surroundings suddenly changed again.

People were running around all over. All of them seemed to be shrieking, but Layla could not hear anything except her own screams. The friends who had been at the wedding ceremony moments ago were there. The kind neighbours she had met in that foreign land were also there.

All of them were being chased. It was as though the blood that had run down Layla’s body had given birth to slaughterers clad in the red of gore and flames.

Steel glistened. A woman who had been her childhood friend was pierced from behind with a spear. A foreign boy who had given Layla flowers had his arm sliced off with a sword and sent flying in the air.

Layla screamed all the more. Not out of fear for her own life. She knew what would happen next. She had already witnessed it time and time again.

Right on cue, a shadow rushed between her and the slaughterer. Layla's father, the former officer of the imperial guards, Rone Jayce.

Her father stood before her and spread his arms out wide and, just like that, he was pierced through his abdomen. As though encountering no resistance from sinew and skin, the spear pierced her father's gut through to his back, its tip emerging before Layla's eyes. Her father's body lurched to one side.

Layla's gaze unconsciously travelled from her father's collapsed form, to the spearhead, and up to the man who was grasping the spear.

A man whose entire body was drenched in fresh blood –

Gil Mephius.

When he laughed, even his teeth were dyed red.

Layla could no longer even hear herself screaming.

"Good." In its place, a solemn voice resounded. "Be at ease, Layla. There's nothing to be afraid of. For now."

This man was not her father, nor her lover.... not even someone she would normally have been acquainted with; yet at his voice, Layla's feelings calmed down shockingly quick.

She quietly closed her eyes and bent her head backwards as though in sleep.

In reality, Layla had been asleep all along. All that she had just experienced, with such vivid fear, was no more than a dream built from the dregs of her memory. The flesh-and-blood Layla was currently alone in a darkened room.

No – there was one other person there: the sorcerer Zafar, clad in robes so black they seemed to melt into the shadows.

He was the man who had arrived a few days ago in Birac and set up a medicine stall. Of course, it was not merely on a whim that the sorcerer had disguised himself as one of the common folk. It was to gather information.

Even if what he caught hold of was only vague, he had intended to learn from the

soldiers serving at the mansion, as well as from the maids who heard of his stall through them, about the movements and attitudes of the man who claimed to be Crown Prince Gil Mephius and who was currently residing in Birac.

Spies sent from Solon had no doubt also arrived in Birac by now and were probably collecting the same information.

Zafar's objective was to support their actions and help them achieve their purpose. However, he was not to let them know that he was a sorcerer serving the Dragon Gods' faith, nor was he allowed to make direct use of his magic powers.

To the very end, everything had to be accomplished by human hands.

Thereupon, a person more suitable than he could ever have hoped for appeared before him.

A lady's maid serving the Garberan princess – Layla. Guessing from her position that she could be made use of, Zafar had brought her to that deserted house; by applying drugs and suggestion, he had then ensnared her into a deeply hypnotised state. As a result of which, he successfully managed to pick up fragments of her memories.

Thanks to them, he inferred that she held a deep-seated hatred towards the prince. It was she herself who had wished to serve the Garberan princess as a lady's maid, and that was probably not unrelated to that hatred.

Zafar worked hard in order to sound out the depths of her consciousness with greater precision. He got her to visit him once every two days.

"Hmm, I see, so that's what the princess is doing."

He listened as Layla, sitting on a chair, gave her report. The sorcerer's invisible "hands" were probing through the depths of her consciousness and, by cutting away scenes in her mind and manipulating them, he was able to alter the deep consciousness. However, that was not the same as saying that he could make her do whatever he wished.

Exactly as had been the case for Reizus, the sorcerer who had once appeared in the western lands claiming to be Garda, it was necessary to spend a lot of time in understanding the heart and mind of the targeted person. Moreover, it was impossible to force them to do something that greatly differed from their own intentions. All that

could be done was to guide the person's feelings until they became convinced that those intentions were their own.

When Zafar had heard that the princess had left Birac, he had wondered – *might there be a way to take her hostage and lure the prince out?*

However, in order to do so, a great many procedures would need to be put into place. Making important changes to a situation was bothersome since a lot needed to be taken into consideration.

Anyway, according to the plan, it should be about the time when I get in touch with the spies.

Just as with Layla, their meeting would have to appear completely coincidental. With that in mind, he would pull in Layla, whose interests coincided with theirs; and, with her cooperation, he would guide the plan to its conclusion.

And for that... It was essential to destroy Layla's doubts, ethics, and feelings as much as possible.

Just as when Reizus had once ordered Princess Lima of Kadyne to "die," making a person under hypnotism act against their own instincts was extremely difficult. Which was why Zafar was taking the time to summon Layla and have her relive again and again the memories of her past. Where and when it was convenient to make a change, he planted feelings within her that overrode her instincts.

Feelings of wanting to kill Crown Prince Gil Mephius.

CHAPTER 6

TRIGGER

PART 1

The amount of guards that escorted Princess Vileena on her return to Solon was all but excessive. They seemed to fear that since Salamand was still in Mephian territory, he might mount a surprise attack and snatch her away.

They had stopped several times to replenish their ether supply, but she had hardly been allowed to leave the ship. The princess however had not made a single complaint. She remained enshrined in her designated seat, her expression tranquil.

Theresia, her lady's maid, was equally calm and composed. When she got tired of their voyage by air, she promptly nodded off to sleep.

Once Vileena had made sure that Theresia was asleep, she would occasionally reach for a medallion that hung from a chain at her neck and which was usually hidden beneath her clothes. It was the one she had given to Orba as an amulet when he had been taking part in the gladiatorial tournament. Through various twists and turns, it had since returned to her.

After hearing that Prince Gil and Orba had returned alive, she had intended to return it at some point, but had taken it with her when she had decided to go to Solon.

Every time she unconsciously reached out to touch it however, she thought – *it's a lucky charm, I should have left it with Orba*. He was, after all, someone who might at any time head out to a life-threatening battle. She started to hate her own changes of heart.

It's not as though we can never meet again. I'll give it to him next time – she decided.

At last, without encountering any difficulty, they arrived in Solon. By then, it was the time when evening shadows were deepening. The audience with the emperor would be the next morning.

As before, Vileena did not say anything in particular. She did not even appear to pay

any attention to the court ladies maids who whispered together when they passed by one another as she made her way to the chambers which she had previously been given. She ate the meal that was brought to her then went to bed before the night grew any later.

The next morning, Vileena Owell faced Guhl Mephius from across the long flight of stairs to the throne.

It had been about two months since she had requested an audience with the emperor to inform him that she would go to Nedain. The people attending this audience however did not have the same amused atmosphere as at that time. Among those present, there were those whose expressions were nervous and strained; those who remained expressionless so as not to appear overly inquisitive; and those who looked at the princess as though she were an eyesore, or else with hatred in their gaze.

Currently, the majority opinion was to view her not as an honoured guest from another land, but as the foreign princess who was supporting the deceitful scoundrel who claimed to be Crown Prince Gil, the impostor who had caused their country to break in half. And then there was the matter of Salamand. There was still that rumour that he had conspired with the princess to bring chaos to Mephius.

“It is a great joy to me to be able to see you again after so long,” Vileena bowed her head.

Certainly, she did a good job of feigning calm, but there was a lot this fourteen-year-old princess would need to say from here on.

For a start, she would have to explain how she had gone to Apta and then to the west after having claimed that she intended to spend a week in Nedain.

There was also the issue of that man who called himself “Gil Mephius” and who had led an armed force into combat against Mephius’ army not far from Apta.

And then she would need to explain her connection to the Garberan troops who had violated the national border.

Vileena, however, did not say a single word about any of these issues.

Neither did Guhl, the emperor of Mephius.

Contrary to expectations, instead of adopting the abrupt tone of an interrogation, he maintained his usual posture, chin resting on his hand, and asked:

“And, what business brings you here especially, Princess? I believe you yourself requested this audience?”

“Yes.”

Seeing her nod in assent, the people in attendance exchanged glances surreptitiously. They had all thought that it was the emperor who had summoned her. Since it was the princess who had personally requested the audience, normally one would expect her to want to explain herself or apologise. What she said however was –

“There is something that I wish to request of Your Majesty.”

A wordless commotion went around the audience chamber.

What she had said was simply beyond impudent. In the first place, just who was it who, having said “I have a request” and obtaining permission to go to Nedain, had then turned traitor? Despite having exchanged a promise with the emperor, she had gone so far as to steal a ship and fly off to Apta. That alone was worthy of capital punishment, but she had then travelled west and betrayed confidential information about Mephius’ plans for invasion.

The emperor had still not granted Nabarl Metti – who had informed him of this – a chance to redeem himself, nor had even allowed him to attend court. If he could hear her, Nabarl would surely be gnashing his teeth. As for Guhl –

“Oh?” As was to be expected, not even he could generously nod in agreement at a time like this. “I believe I have already granted a request of yours, Princess. What more could you want? Even for you, Princess, I will not be able to grant a wish for me to surrender this seat to the deceiving fool who claims to be my son,” he chuckled.

The retainers felt chilled from those harsh words, and not one of them dared to smile.

The princess was at a loss. Her eyes lowered, she seemed to be examining her own feet for inspiration.

The silence stretched on for a while.

Just when it seemed that the princess known for her dauntlessness had no more moves to play...

“Your promise,” Princess Vileena spoke again. “Do you remember your promise?”

Guhl’s heavy eyelids blinked a few times. The princess continued –

“It was during Mephius’ Founding Festival, at the time of the gladiatorial tournament,” she added.

Naturally, nobody had any idea what she was talking about. They were convinced that the princess must be babbling out of desperation. However –

“Ohh,” Guhl’s shoulders heaved, “Now that you mention it, during the semi-finals, I made a bet with you, Princess, didn’t I? I wagered on a criminal who had once been acclaimed as a hero, while you bet on that former gladiator, Orba. Now what was the result again?”

“Orba won.”

The faces gathered in the audience chamber all wore expressions of confusion and surprise. Not a single person there had known about this bet between the emperor and the foreign princess. What surprised them even more was that the emperor had not only specifically asked what the outcome had been when it should have gone without saying, but that he had let the princess tell him. Did he do so for the sake of letting his retainers know what the bet had been about, and to indicate that he was prepared to receive her request?

“Your Majesty promised to grant me whatever I wished for.”

“I remember,” the emperor nodded.

He might have been expected to be enjoying this conversation, yet his expression remained sullen. Nevertheless, he was leaning forward a little.

“Oh?” He raised his eyebrows. “Since you have expressly brought this up, have you found something that you want? I certainly said that I would offer you anything you liked. As I said earlier though, I will not vacate this seat.”

“I thank you for your graciousness,” the princess for her part was all but expressionless.

It seemed reasonable enough but, after all, she must be feeling nervous.

Could it be...

The retainers once again exchanged significant glances with each other.

The princess couldn't be asking for a reconciliation with the Impostor Crown Prince, could she?

Impossible. It was a bet made in fun, she won't ask for something that huge. She can't be that much of a child.

Maybe she wants to ask His Majesty to let her return to Garbera?

Oh! If that's what it is, then it might be possible...

The princess raised her eyes.

“Then, although it is shameless of me, I have something to ask of Your Majesty.”

“Speak.”

“I, Vileena Owell, request soldiers.”

Of all the entertaining imperial audiences that had occurred in recent times, this scene, at which all the courtiers present were – momentarily – staring at wide-eyed, might well have been the most interesting spectacle of them all.

“Please lend me about a hundred soldiers.”

“Oh,” Guhl Mephius was unperturbed. However, he did not give the impression that he was merely humouring a child's nonsense either. “A hundred soldiers... And what would you do with them?”

“If you would grant me just that many of Mephius' mighty warriors, I would expel a fool from Mephius' territory.”

“And this fool is?”

“Salamand Fogel.”

Vileena neither faltered nor hesitated.

Everyone there was utterly dumbfounded.

This princess, she... was saying that on the basis of a verbal promise with the emperor, she would borrow a hundred soldiers and with them, would expel Salamand from the territory he had trespassed into.

She had come from Garbera to marry into Mephius, so there had still been some scope for sympathy when she had lost her fiancé. It was, no doubt, for that reason that the emperor had allowed her to go to Nedain. However, her subsequent actions had been intolerable. And now, she was making an even more absurd claim.

The shoulders of some of the people there were quivering. Others, having recovered from their momentary surprise, were sneering. Most, however, simply held their breath and peered inquiringly at the emperor’s expression.

“How truly interesting.”

All those present suddenly looked tense. The emperor lifted his chin from his hand.

“Asking for a hundred soldiers is truly like you, Princess. Do you know this Salamand person?”

“Neither by face nor by name,” the princess shook her head.

At that point, the emperor smiled.

“Then can you send Salamand away, Princess?”

“That person insolently made use of my name to force his way into Mephius. If I move out brandishing Mephius’ flag, that person will lose his claim to a cause.”

“What you say is understandable. It is indeed... however, I cannot allow a princess entrusted in our care by a foreign country to undertake something so dangerous. And if the rumour sprang up that I had tearfully begged a fourteen or fifteen-year-old girl to drive out a foreign enemy, even I would not be able hold my head high as emperor.”

“That is also one of my objectives.”

“Oh?”

“That was a joke. However, Your Majesty, if you will pardon further rudeness on my part...”

“What is it?”

“I, Vileena Owell, why... for what purpose am I here?”

“You came from Garbera to marry my son, Gil Mephius.”

“Indeed. I am Garberan and, in the not too distant future, I will be Mephian.”

Once again, there not a single person who did not succumb to nervousness. Recently – specifically, since the accidental death of Simon Rodloom – the emperor had been remarkably taciturn, yet now he was engaging in a long exchange with the princess.

From that alone, it was clear that the emperor had a fondness for this girl. Her decisive speech and personality were no doubt pleasing to Guhl, who had once been renowned as a warrior.

But those last words were entirely impossible to overlook.

“In the not too distant future, I will be Mephian.” – In other words, it meant that she would, as planned, become Gil Mephius’ wife. That plan however had already crumbled to nothing. Gil had been killed in Apta, by someone from the west. Even so, Vileena had clearly said that she would “become Mephian.” That was basically equivalent to saying that the man whom Guhl had unequivocally declared to be an impostor was actually the heir to the crown of Mephius.

Guhl Mephius suddenly rose from the throne.

Startled, most of the people there instinctively cowered back. The emperor took hold of his long staff.

“Colyne,” he called the name of one of his retainers.

“Y-Yes.” Colyne Isphan hurriedly drew near.

“Call the commander of my Imperial Guards and have him pick a hundred men. In addition, mobilise all the master blacksmiths of Solon and give them the order that, by tomorrow, they are to have forged a full set of armour suitable for the princess’ build.”

“Wha... No... B-But, Your Majesty...”

Colyne’s reputation rested mainly on his ability to always act – both in words and deeds – only according to the emperor’s thoughts, but even he could only blink in bewilderment.

“What?”

“A-Are you going to accept the princess’ proposal?”

“Do you see any other explanation?”

“B-But... That...”

No one there was able to laugh at Colyne’s confusion. Everyone assembled in that room felt the exact same way.

The emperor having personally accepted the princess’ proposal could result in nothing but embarrassment for the country. Moreover, if, by any chance, danger befell the princess, the relationship with Garbera would definitively be severed.

Only one person remained calm – the one who had caused all this shock and bewilderment, Vileena Owell herself. She remained kneeling, her head bowed. Although in fact, and you would not know it if you were not observing her closely, but her white neck was trembling imperceptibly.

“Colyne, who am I?” Guhl asked, as though imitating the princess’ earlier words.

“H-His Imperial Majesty Guhl Mephius, emperor of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius.”

“Indeed. And Guhl Mephius never goes back on his promises, even if they are made with women or children. Now obey my orders!”

At long last, the audience chamber erupted with noise.

Even in Mephius’ long history, a princess riding out at the head of a troop of soldiers

was almost certainly without precedent.

And in the first place, it was the emperor himself who had ordered that Salamand's unit be left alone until such a time as it finally turned into a real threat. Was this not because they could be used to strike at the Impostor Prince and diminish his presence?

Nobody could understand what the emperor's true intentions were. Of course, that had been true since long ago but, in a sense, the emperor's words and deeds were now more inscrutable than ever before.

Guhl's cloak fluttered as he left the audience chamber. The retainers hurriedly rose to see him off.

Among them, Empress Melissa Mephius was the only one to remain seated, and she stared coldly down at the princess.

"The circumstances have changed," came the repeated insistence.

As soon as the audience at court was over, Empress Melissa had headed for the Dragon Gods' temple. Normally, someone would immediately have come to greet her, but today she had been unable to see anyone. Finally, she had managed to catch hold of one of the elders.

"Did you not say that you would take care of the matter concerning that girl?"

"Conditions have changed since then," he countered Melissa's words. "Do not worry, even I have heard what the 'diagnosis' was for you, Empress. However, since that girl joined the Impostor Prince's side, the circumstances of that fate have come to be understood. Please be at ease and focus on giving birth to a splendid heir."

"But..." Melissa bit her lower lip in what was a girlish gesture. Since she would soon be giving birth, the balance of her heart was apparently easily thrown into disarray.

Staring fixedly at the Empress, who was in this state, the Elder suddenly lowered his voice.

"If it is of concern to you... and if it is your wish... It is fine for you to make your own

move. We will not take part in this matter, nor do we have any authority to stop anything.”

Empress Melissa raised her head in surprise. Her expression was a bit like that of an ordinary person who had been struggling to debate an obtuse philosophical point with a learned and aged scholar, and who had suddenly, by chance, found at their feet a piece of paper with all the answers written down.

“Is that alright?”

“The times are changed by people. As for us, our existences are akin to guardians of fate. You may move as you see fit.”

After leaving the temple, the Empress sent some of her ladies’ maids to the commander of the Imperial Guards and obtained a list of the hundred men who would be accompanying the princess.

Having been given such abrupt marching orders, those men were in the middle of making hurried preparations.

“Tanis, if you’ve got a spare cloak, could you lend it me?”

One of them, a man named Alnakk, was scurrying madly among his comrades.

“Didn’t you get told last time to put in a request if you needed supplies?”

“I forgot. At the time, everyone was saying that a battle would break out at any moment in Nedain, so it was completely hectic.”

The imperial guard called Tanis sighed and laid out a spare for Alnakk. Both men were young. Alnakk had risen to becoming an imperial guard through his achievements during the ten-year war with Garbera, but Tanis had virtually no experience with a large-scale battle.

“But hey, Tanis, the little Garberan princess sure said something outrageous. And now even we’ve gotten caught up in it...”

“I admire her. A princess personally leading soldiers and sallying out to subjugate the rebels; it’s like something out of an illustrated storybook. It’s an honour to be able to be part of such a historic scene.”

“You sure are a romantic dreamer, Tanis. What’ll you do if the enemy doesn’t listen to the princess and suddenly opens fire?”

“That’s just what I’m hoping for. I’ll chop off the heads of those bastards who’ve come swaggering any way they want into our territory.”

“On top of being a dreamer, are you going to paint yourself as a paragon of justice, like those Garberan knights? There’s no saving you.”

“So, if the enemy attacks, what’ll you do, Alnakk?”

“Run away at once.”

“Idiot,” Tanis had been trying to look solemn, but now unintentionally burst out laughing. “In that case, forget being attacked by the enemy, the first thing you’ll need to worry about is His Majesty’s wrath.”

“I’m just one guy and I don’t have family either, so I can run away completely. Right, I could always flee to the west and become a pedlar.”

Since this was the company of Imperial Guards under the emperor’s direct orders, most of the soldiers were from good families, although there were also some young men among them who, like Alnakk, had risen up in the world by joining their ranks. Many dreamed that as Imperial Guards, if they achieved merit and caught the emperor’s attention, they might even be able to obtain the rank of aristocrat. Alnakk however did not seem to dream of such success in life.

“Well, I’ll probably be appointed as one of your pursuers. So I’ll hunt you down to the ends of the earth,” while Tanis was saying that, a visitor arrived for him.

It was the young girl who always acted as the go-between for him and his lover, a maid serving at court. She stealthily handed him a letter.

“Oooh, a secret assignation right before leaving?”

“Hey, don’t tell anyone.”

“Got it. Go and replenish your energy all you want, you ladies’ man.”

Tanis was in a relationship with a servant from the Women’s Quarters of the Palace

who was, moreover, a maid to Empress Melissa. He was anticipating this night before departure to be tender as well as passionate and fierce.

The young couple boldly used a room inside the palace for their trysts. It was always empty and was in a blind spot for the guard patrols, so it was perfect for their use.

It was also the place specified in the letter. After the sun had set, and making sure to be sufficiently cautious of his surroundings, Tanis made his way there.

Although his lover should already have arrived, the inside of the room was dark. There was a hint of something squirming in the shadows.

It was impossible to see very well, but the clothes were those of a lady's maid. It looked like she had decided on something different today. Tanis held his breath and embraced the maid from behind.

Immediately, he was seized by an uncomfortable feeling.

Driven by a sense that something was terribly wrong, he let go of the maid's shoulders and peered closely at her face.

Tanis gasped. The passion that had taken hold of his body, and with it, all the things he had imagined about the future, were all snatched away in that instant.

PART 2

Salamand Fogel's name would certainly go down in History.

At any rate, Salamand himself and the five hundred men who had followed him as part of his suicide squad were all convinced of it.

Garbera's royal family was on the verge of losing its pride, so they would thrust the true meaning of honour before it, bravely fight in enemy territory, and there die a splendid and heroic death. Starting with Salamand's, all five hundred of their names would be immortalised, engraved on a stone monument.

Still, it had been more than seven days since they had crossed the border and, although they had been searching and preparing for death, Salamand and the others were, not surprisingly, becoming impatient and irritated.

Partly as a feint, they had taken their time progressing north along the Domick Flats, but there had been no particular movement from the enemy side. At most, and only very rarely, they saw airships flying in the distance, probably to check their location.

In that case... They had no choice but to make a move themselves.

Salamand Fogel firmly set a course for Solon. Along the way, there were any number of small castles and forts set up to defend the capital. He intended to attack them.

That night, he talked about the plan while they held their last supper around the campfire. The provisions from the Mephian village had now run out. The suicide squad however did not behave tragically: everyone sang and danced while their excitement swelled, even without there being any alcohol.

At dawn, they leapt on their horses.

And galloped forward.

The sun illuminated the faces of the Garberan knights with its pale light.

They came to a meadow of short grass.

“Enemies.”

The scouts who had been sent out ahead had returned. They hurried up to Salamand. “Mephian riders are coming this way,” they reported.

Uwah! – a commotion ran throughout the troop. Salamand’s expression turned tense. When he asked for details however, it appeared that the enemy numbered roughly a hundred. Moreover, it was a group of riders who were not pulling any cannons with them.

“A hundred?” Salamand’s voice sounded frankly displeased.

Have they sent out emissaries, at this point? It looked like they still thought that he would heed their remonstrances. Had they brought a few weapons to demonstrate their military might while intending on playing up the alliance?

“What should we do?” His subordinates asked, their expressions disappointed. “Should we send a letter to Guhl? Something like ‘come out and fight us, you bastard’ might work.”

“Yeah, it might but,” Salamand looked as though he was gritting his teeth, “the first thing we’ll do is put down that one hundred. We’ll send all their heads to Solon. That will be better than any letter to show Guhl how serious we are.”

“Uwah!” Fired up, the knights once again raised their voices all together. This was the fight they had been waiting for until they were tired of waiting, it was as though their spirit was radiating from them and piercing out from their armour; each as determined as a giant who knew no fear.

Salamand had his men take up a seven-column formation and they galloped off, whipping their horses onwards.

The area had little in the way of cover. There were barely any dips and rolls on the ground’s surface. When it came to the fight, it would be a head-on collision.

Right – under his helmet, Salamand gloated at the thought of being able to show off the mettle of Garberan knights.

Before long, the figures of the ‘enemy’ came into sight. As reported, a hundred or so armoured riders were approaching in a line. About half of them seemed to have guns

slung across their backs.

From the horses flanking the leader of the group on either side fluttered the banner of Mephius. Salamand felt as though the blood coursing through him was growing wilder and wilder. Yet –

Huh? – He noticed the mounted soldier who was in the lead.

He could not help but notice.

Tiny.

His visor was lowered so that it was impossible to make out his features, but he was surely still a child. Wondering what they were planning, Salamand raised his sword and gave his men the order to hold.

The enemy group similarly halted their horses. It was that tiny warrior who had given the order. In which case, he looked like he was the commander after all.

The young son of some renowned noble, or maybe... a youth connected to the imperial family perhaps?

At any rate, it looked as though the enemy had, from the start, no intention of engaging in battle here. Salamand's expression twisted at the realisation.

The two forces faced each other from across a distance of about a hundred metres^[1]. There was a gentle wind and the national flags that each side had raised wafted listlessly overhead.

If Salamand's men were to seize their spears or the swords at their waist, the Mephian soldiers would go for their guns.

Only the sound of the horses' rough breathing disturbed the silence.

"Parley. I wish to parley with the knights from Garbera," the tiny soldier at the head of the Mephian side spoke.

A high and childish voice, as expected.

"You have come trampling over Mephian territory and are on course for the imperial

capital, Solon. Turn your horses around immediately and return to your own land. In his generosity, and in the name of the alliance and its agreements, His Imperial Majesty Guhl Mephius will then pardon your crimes.”

“Ridiculous,” Salamand’s voice, in sharp contrast, was deep and rough. “Sending out a child like you; Guhl knows no shame. Pardon our crimes? The ones who have committed crimes that defy the heavens are you Mephians.”

“What crime have we committed?”

“As if you didn’t know. The one against Garbera’s exalted royal family, against Lady Vileena Owell. Bring her here to us. Otherwise, we have no reason to listen to the likes of you.”

“Why do we need to bring Princess Vileena to you?”

Asking such a question at this point in time – Salamand sneered from atop his horse.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. Since the princess isn’t here, I won’t stoop to exchanging words with the likes of you lot. You’d best hurry on back to your castle. If you don’t, we’ll have to give a spanking to that green ass of yours!” Salamand roared, brandishing his spear, while his men laughed jeeringly.

“I see.” Without the slightest trace of fear, the enemy commander nodded once then brought his hands to his helmet. “In that case, with *this* you should be willing to listen, Salamand.”

“What!” Having his name called without any kind of courtesy, Salamand’s smile vanished.

The enemy commander removed his helmet in one swift movement.

In the same moment, the platinum blond hair that seemed to have been bundled beneath flowed free and fell shimmering past her shoulders.

Salamand and the five hundred Garberan knights all gasped for breath.

A person who could not possibly have been there had suddenly appeared. It was as though the dead had suddenly resurrected from beyond the grave. It had been just the same when Gil Mephius had revived in Apta.

“P-Princess...”



Salamand had now lost his voice as well as his smile, and in his place, it was one of the knights behind him who choked out the words.

“Princess Vileena!”

“Impossible,” Salamand yelled, his eyes bulging.

“Now then,” for her part, Vileena Owell addressed him in a perfectly cool voice, “is this enough for you, Salamand, knight of Garbera? With this, you have neither pretext nor just cause to invade Mephian territory. I trust that you are satisfied since I, Vileena Owell, am here as you requested.”

“T-That...” Salamand bent forward as though to avoid some projectile which had suddenly come flying at him. “W-Why... Princess, how can you be here? Why?”

“Why?” Sitting on her horse, Vileena tilted her head. It was a very girlish gesture but, immediately afterwards, she suddenly glared at the ‘enemy commander’. “Do you not understand, knave?” She bellowed.

Salamand’s expression was exactly that of someone who has just swallowed solid food whole and without chewing.

“Why am I – I who was born and raised in Garbera – why am I here? I will tell you why, Salamand. It is so that two countries who have more than a decade of sorrowful history between them can join hands and walk together towards the same future. So that soldiers and the innocent populace no longer have to suffer the ravages of war. So that the two flags are no longer sullied with blood. It is for that sake that I, Vileena Owell, crossed the border to marry His Highness Gil Mephius, Crown Prince of Mephius. Now, Salamand, it’s *your* turn. Why are you here? You need only answer this: having stepped over the border, do you or do you not carry a greater cause and greater resolve than I do? Well!”

Salamand Fogel had his mouth gaping open. His tough body seemed to have been ripped to shreds by a few words from a fragile young girl.

Still, he just managed to squeeze out his voice.

“B-But...”

Salamand had marched his warhorses on the premise that he would die. Being

exposed to bullets would have left him utterly unaffected, but for this kind of predicament to befall him was something he had never even imagined.

“From what I have heard, Crown Prince Gil has risen against the emperor, and the country is currently torn apart. Additionally, the emperor has declared that Gil an impostor. Princess, you yourself are being exposed to danger which...”

“And did you think that justified the actions you took? The matter is unrelated to Garbera. To say nothing of the fact that you, who are not part of the royal family, have no authority to interfere.”

“Your pardon but this matter is by no means unrelated! If Mephius lapses into chaos, anyone can tell that Garbera, as its neighbouring country, is at risk of having the sparks fall on it. All the more so since Guhl makes light of the alliance. In which case, we...”

“So tedious!”

Vileena curtly brushed him off then pulled a handgun from her waist and aimed at Salamand’s head. Her actions were so fast and so precise that for a moment, the knights were not able to grasp whether this was really happening.

“P-Princess...”

“Do you still not understand? *I am here*. This is proof that Mephius and Garbera are tied in an alliance. The one making light of that alliance is you, Salamand. Fine then, continue forward. That will be the same as kicking my body away with your dirty feet and trampling over my head, since I am supposed to be the bridge between these two countries. It’s fine, aim for Solon and march forward. That will be the same...”

“Princess!”

The reason why Salamand and the five hundred soldiers following him had yelled out was because Vileena had changed the aim of the muzzle and now had it pressed against her own temple.

“...That will be the same as acting in exchange for my life.”

Vileena’s palely smouldering eyes stared straight at Salamand.

There was nobody there who truly realised that *this* was a repeat of Zaim Fortress.

Which was natural enough, since Salamand believed in Ryucown – who had fallen at Zaim – like he would a god and had not been present to witness his end.

Of those there, amidst the gentle breeze blowing across the meadow, the only one who knew was the fourteen-year-old princess. At that time too, Vileena had pressed a gun against her temple. Turning herself into a hostage, so to speak, she had wanted to dissuade Ryucown from his path of violence.

She had, however, failed.

He had been on the verge of cutting her head off with his own sword. Ryucown, who had loved Garbera more than anyone – and who had been more a knight than anyone; in the end, he had been suppressed by Crown Prince Gil's order, against whom he had been fighting, and by Orba's sword, who had infiltrated Zaim at Gil's command.

This time – she was determined.

Of course, she was not without fear. While she was doing this, soldiers, seized by frenzy, might pull the trigger of their guns; and in the next instant, the girl's fragile body – eyes, nose, mouth, chest, limbs – would be pierced through with lead bullets.

The beat her heart was drumming to was so fast that she could no longer keep up with it; yet at the same time, the interval between each individual beat was so long and sluggish, that it was hard to believe it was still beating at all.

If her overflowing fighting spirit were to ebb for even a moment, tears would, without a doubt, well up in her eyes and she would burst into uncontrollable sobbing. However –

I won't cry anymore – Vileena had decided.

At Zaim Fortress, she had made the mistake of crying. She was no longer the little girl from back then. Her doe-like eyes would not be wet with tears a second time in front of soldiers.

“Will you kill me, Salamand?” Vileena Owell asked, pushing down all those many emotions.

“What are you saying?”

“At the very end, Ryucown turned his sword against me. I am asking you if you intend to do the same.”

“T-The general... Something like that, he...” Salamand shook his head as though he was feeling shaken.

“You resemble Ryucown. Except smaller and distorted. That is what you are, Salamand Fogel. A tiny, pitiful existence clinging to Ryucown’s grave and bawling your eyes out because you do not have the strength to accept his death.”

Salamand was trembling all over. The knights spoke not a word. In that, they were identical to the soldiers that the princess had brought with her.

Amazing. Amazing. You’re awesome, Little Princess!

Even while admiration was plastered all over his face, the Imperial Guard called Alnakk softly and slowly reached for the scabbard at his waist. The reason for that was because he recognised that look of Salamand’s. It was back when he used to play with a boy from his neighbourhood who had been about the same age as him. He had looked after him like a little brother but one day, for some reason or another, things had turned into his making fun of him. Even though it had not been anything that awful, the boy had suddenly lost his temper and struck at him with a nearby vase.

Salamand’s expression looked a lot like his had.

“Ah... I... I...” Salamand’s voice was like a groan, “This is where I die!”

As sharp as an arrow, he propelled his horse forward.

He readied his spear. Its tip was aimed at Princess Vileena. He saw that she had moved the handgun away from her own head.

Salamand was not aiming for the princess herself.

He intended to pass by her flank and attack the Mephian soldiers. Dying in a fight against Mephian troops was the ideal he craved to the point of insanity. It would have been one thing if there had still been hope for dying a glorious death, but after having been cornered mentally, he was taking his ideals for reality.

the princess' pale face was directly opposite Salamand, so, still riding his horse hard, he had it move sideways. He whipped it again.

Alnakk reacted faster than anyone. He kicked his horse's flanks and drew his sword from its sheath.

He had jumped forward to protect the princess but as Salamand's momentum carried on unabated, it looked as though he was going to pass straight by her and arrive right in front of him.

Dammit! At this rate, Salamand's spear would pierce through his chest.

A gunshot like the roar of a wild beast rang out, drowning out the sound of the wind.

Salamand lurched in his saddle. He toppled sideways then, after a strangely slow fall, slammed into the ground.

"Ah!"

Who was it who shouted out? Was it Alnakk, some other Mephian soldier, or perhaps a Garberan knight?

Gunpowder smoke was coming from the gun muzzle that Vileena had raised to shoulder height. The princess turned her horse around and guided it to a position from which she could look straight down at the fallen Salamand.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

The nearby Alnakk, still dumbfounded, looked down at Salamand out of reflex.

"No, he is unconscious. I don't know if he will wake up though," he answered.

The bullet had hit Salamand in the back but it had not penetrated into it. Blood spread out from beneath his body.

I shot to kill though. Vileena however did not say that out loud.

Something was caught in her chest. It was fine for now since her resolve was set, but she felt so shaky that if that resolve slipped, she would probably throw up as soon as she opened her mouth.

Vileena tightened her expression and turned her gaze towards the Garberan knights.

Of the more than five hundred of them, not one had moved. If Salamand had been shot by a Mephian soldier, any number of them would probably have surged forward for revenge. But the bullet had been fired by Princess Vileena, the one whom Salamand had himself brandished as his cause. When Salamand was felled, the sheer shock caused the Garberan soldier who had hoisted the national flag to drop it to the ground.

It was a strange twist of fate.

Once, there had been knights who followed Ryucown in his quest to recover chivalry.

Once, there had been soldiers who agreed with Raswan Bazgan's cry of wresting back supremacy for the west.

And now, there were those who had travelled along with Salamand Fogel on his journey towards death.

All of them, whatever the ideals they had cherished, had found their path blocked by the very princess they had hoped to share those ideals with.

Vileena, who had twice experienced this scene, did not turn her eyes away from their stricken faces.

"Royalty is something that cannot exist alone," she murmured. "It's only when there are retainers and the people that royalty can be royalty. Then what does royalty do? It shows the way. That way may go against the dictates of the heart. But desperately trying to correct that will give rise... Will sometimes give rise to such terrible strife that there is no recovering from it."

Both Garbera and Mephius were currently in that situation.

If taking action in that situation was an error, then Gil Mephius was unquestionably in the wrong.

Vileena Owell did not have a clear answer either.

One of the knights turned his horse around and fled from there. Another, then another followed suit. Vileena did not pursue them. Perhaps there were those among them who had not yet given up, and who still intended to gather companions to die in

Mephius.

However, they would no longer be able to dress up their military action as some great cause; not now that their ringleader, Salamand Fogel, had been apprehended in Mephius at the hands of none other than Princess Vileena. Theirs would simply be a meaningless death that would achieve nothing for their country.

Vileena quietly brushed back the hair hanging in her eyes. It looked like the wind was getting stronger. Mephius' flag was flapping more and more vigorously, while Garbera's on the other hand still lay on the ground where it had been left by the knights.

For a while, everyone there simply allowed themselves to be buffeted by the wind, without saying anything, without making the slightest movement, only maintaining the silence.

In the distance, an airship came into sight, flying through the sky. Judging from its direction, it had come from the south – it was probably part of Mephius' border patrol.

"Would that..." Vileena said to the Imperial Guards behind her.

They caught her meaning immediately and promptly started to move, as though ordered by their liege. The riders carrying the flags galloped off ahead of the route that the airship was following, and signalled for it to land by holding the flags high.

The ones who touched down a few minutes later were indeed soldiers from the border guards. According to them, they were carrying news that troops would soon be crossing the border from Garbera's Zaim Fortress.

Zenon Owell's irritation had finally reached a boiling point. He had previously sent a letter to the emperor, the gist of which was a request to "allow us to subjugate Salamand," but had received no answer. Deciding that the situation was at risk of becoming unsalvageable if things remained as they were, he had apparently decided to personally take down Salamand, even if that meant that relations between the two countries might be a little strained for a while afterwards.

The soldiers on board the airship were on their way to convey the information to Solon.

Vileena's immediate decision was that "we cannot afford to waste any time."

The Imperial Guards had no objection either. About seventy percent of them would head towards Solon with Salamand, while the remainder would accompany Vileena south.

Alnakk and Tanis were among the soldiers chosen to travel with her.

PART 3

When she arrived at a relay base for the airships used by the border guards, Vileena dispatched an airship messenger ahead of her. "By Vileena Owell's name, you are not allowed to cross the border," he was to announce.

"You are not allowed" were certainly words befitting of the princess' dauntless spirit, but she did not have the heart to sit and wait at the base for the response.

She took several of the Imperial Guards with her, although rather than guards, their role was more to keep an eye on the princess. After a half-hour break, they continued on towards the border. The princess would have liked to shorten the time needed, even if only by a little, by riding airships, but the Imperial Guards did not know how to pilot them. Since they would not be able to keep up on horseback, it would increase the suspicion that she was trying to escape from them.

In the end, they set off again on fresh horses.

As they approached the southern border, the steep and rugged rock faces of the Vlad Plateau rose before them. The Vlad Plateau contained Seirin Valley, where Vileena, who at the time had barely just arrived in Mephius, had attended a ritual preceding the marriage ceremony.

Back in those days, I was quite the soldier... Her long hair fluttering, she could not help but indulge in a sudden, unintended sentimentality. *I thought that I would definitely be able to twist Mephius' foolish Crown Prince around my little finger and manipulate him in Garbera's favour.*

That younger Vileena had been gallant and fearless, and had held the pride of a knight in her chest. Torn between envy and embarrassment of her past self, she lapsed for a while into a conflicted state of mind.

Before long, however, they arrived at a point from which they could faintly make out the outline of Zaim Fortress, and her expression grew tense. Since a messenger had been sent beforehand, they could also see the welcoming party sent out by the Garberan side.

"Please wait here," the princess called out to the Imperial Guards. What she meant was that from there on, she would be heading towards Garbera.

Are you planning to return to Garbera? – Was a suspicion that nobody voiced. Instead, Alnakk announced –

“I will go with you.”

They could not, after all, let her go alone. Vileena nodded silently.

Guided by the Garberan side, they passed through a small path that passed between the Bruno Hills to the west and the Nouzen Mountains to the east. Flanked on either side by steep slopes on which grew a few straggling trees, Vileena and Alnakk urged their horses onwards in silence.

At the end of the upwards slanting path, Prince Zenon Owell, the second prince of Garbera and commander of the Order of the Tiger, was waiting for them. He was in full armour, with sword and handgun at his waist.

When she saw his figure, a warm feeling spread through Vileena’s chest.

Even though they were far apart in age, as siblings, they had always been close. When she had been young, they had played together with toy swords.

“You could become a commander inferior to no man,” Zenon had laughed.

And when it was decided that she was to marry into Mephius, he had said to her, “Vileena, it’s fine if you don’t want to.”

It was not fine. The king had already handed down his decision. Even if he resisted it to the end, as a prince, Zenon must have known that he could not overturn it. Yet even so, he had told her that.

The little sister had appreciated her older brother’s feelings. “Brother, I will be going to Mephius,” she had smiled.

At the time, Vileena had a warrior’s determination. It was just as she had earlier recalled at the Vlad Plateau: she had decided to be the hero who would thrust a spear right through the centre of the hated Mephius. Thus she had believed that she would certainly see her brother again in the near future.

At that point, the princess realised something – it had been less than a year since she had left Garbera. As they faced each other like this however, she understood that the

time that had elapsed for both of them had been anything but short. The warm feelings she was experiencing were not only from the joy of reunion.

“Don’t you want to take it easier?” Zenon asked, offering her a chair, but Vileena shook her head.

There were other officers and soldiers there. They had all appeared from behind the prince as though drawn forward and gazed at the princess as if at something dazzling, forming a semi-circle some distance from her.

“About Salamand Fogel, you have received the message?”

“Yeah.”

“Our Mephius has retained custody of him. The remaining soldiers have scattered, but if they attempt any more outrages in Mephian territory, they will be slain.”

“So be it.” This was more or less in line with what Zenon Owell had surmised after receiving a messenger sent in Vileena’s name. “Their names have already been struck from the military and civil registries. I would be happy to personally arrest them as criminals if they return to our country. If Mephius wishes it, we could then hand them over immediately.”

“Thank you,” Vileena gave slight nod.

Seen from outside, it was a conversation that seemed far too formal to be one between a brother and sister who had not seen each other for so long. The gazes they exchanged however held a warmth that only they understood.

For the two of them, simply looking long into each other’s eyes was just as clear as if the older brother had stretched out his hand and clasped his little sister’s shoulders, or if she had leapt into his arms.

An insolent lout came up to what could only be seen as the siblings’ private space.

Oh? Vileena inwardly knit her brows as his was not a face that she had expected to see in the encampment that her brother had set up there.

“It has been a long time, Princess Vileena.”

Noue Salzantes. He was the older brother of the current head of the Salzantes House and a man praised as Garbera's most resourceful commander.

"Was it at Mephius' Founding Festival?"

Noue had visited the imperial capital, Solon as a congratulatory envoy at the time of the festival.

Since he was famed as a strategist, there was nothing strange about his being in a place that might at any moment have turned into a battlefield, but Vileena had thought that he was a man whom her brother would not want to associate with. Yet here he was next to him.

I see. It really has been anything but short – she realised anew.

Noue was holding a letter in his hand. He held it out to Vileena.

"This letter was originally meant for His Imperial Majesty, Guhl Mephius, from my liege, King Ainn Owell. It was on the pretext of delivering this that Salamand trespassed into your country's territory. The incident this time was due to our ineptitude, but if you would deign to read this letter, it will surely make clear that this was never the intention of Garbera's royal family. My lord's dearest wish is to maintain the alliance and friendship between Mephius and Garbera."

"I will pass it on."

The letter was accompanied by another which had been newly written by Zenon and Noue. She did not check the contents, but no doubt it contained various things about the future. Perhaps Noue would even visit Solon again as a messenger.

"Well then, with this..." Having concluded their business, Vileena bowed.

Going away from her brother, her steps truly felt heavy. But she would endure and turn her back. At that moment –

"Princes Vileena," her brother called out to her. Faster than she could turn to look back in surprise, "give my greetings to His Highness Gil. Tell him I'm entrusting my little sister to his care," Zenon said with a smile.

"I'll tell him," was all Vileena answered.

For a fleeting moment, something seemed to flash across the girl's profile. She quickly smiled however and called out to Alnakk.

"Well then, let's go back. They must all be getting tired of waiting."

Even after Vileena and the soldier accompanying her had passed out of sight, Zenon did not move for a long time.

Noue and most of the men had already withdrawn to Zaim Fortress. The only ones remaining were a few from the Order of the Tiger.

When he had spoken to Vileena directly, a number of feelings had, of course, been mixing together in his chest. *To think that she was the one to save us, after all.*

Salamand Fogel had been captured by Vileena Owell of Garbera's royal family. This truth would probably suppress the anti-Mephius feeling within the country better than anything else possibly could.

No... Zenon Owell smiled faintly. Whatever anyone else may think, he did not believe that his little sister had acted as one of Garbera's royal family. Thinking that, he was seized by an unusual sentimentality.

In this life, this might be where we part ways.

He had steeled himself to the same thought when his little sister had left to marry into Mephius. At that time, however, the will to conquer Mephius still remained somewhere within him. Just as Vileena, he had expected to meet again in the near future.

This time was different.

Which was why those resurgent feelings were so strong.

Zenon threw himself on horseback and started forward. In a direction other than Zaim's. The action was abrupt but his men did not say anything as they also got onto their horses and obediently followed him.

They arrived at the top of a hill from where they could look down on the road leading

from Zaim to Mephius. Below, the figures of the riders seemed small. The soldiers who had accompanied her had just met up with Vileena.

Zenon silently watched her departing form.

In his heart, he made a prayer that the future that awaited his proud little sister would be as happy as could be.

It was at that moment.

A gunshot rang out.

Zenon was well used to battlefields: it was impossible for him to mistake that sound.

Vileena's body lurched up and down. For a second, her horse writhed violently and his sister was flung from it.

She was thrown to the ground.

And did not move.

What!? Before he even noticed it, Zenon was whipping his horse forward.

When Vileena turned away from Zaim, it felt as though something had caught at her hair and was tugging it backwards. After having seen one of her relatives for the first time in so long, she was hit with fresh homesickness. The faces of her father, mother, and grandfather appeared in her mind and would not leave.

And of course, she too was prepared for the fact that this might be where they parted ways forever.

The girl gulped back feelings so strong that they seemed as though they might tear her body apart. The road she needed to follow lay in the opposite direction of Garbera. At its end was Solon.

Looking at her conflicted figure from behind, Imperial Guard Alnakk was full of praise. *The princess of Garbera is pretty damn reliable.*

When she had gone to report the situation to Prince Zenon, she must have had the option to remain in Garbera. In repelling Salamand, you could say that she had already accomplished her duty towards Mephius. She did not need to return to Solon and deliberately expose herself to danger at a time when even the survival of her fiancé, Gil Mephius was doubtful – or rather, more than that, when Gil and the emperor were in open confrontation.

In which case, if she had said “I will wait and see how things go in Mephius,” and returned to Garbera, she would not have received any accusations of being ungrateful from the other country.

In spite of that, the princess, as though it had been the most natural thing in the world, had said, “let’s go back.”

Maybe... Alnakk was prey to some very mixed feelings... maybe, since this princess was with him, that Impostor Crown Prince is also...

Before long, they joined up with his comrades.

The Imperial Guard named Tanis was among them. He was a young man who had been friends with Alnakk since long ago. Perhaps out of worry for the princess or for his friend, his expression was stiff. Plunged into his own thoughts however, Alnakk did not pay any undue attention to it.

He, along with his companions, started on the road to Solon. Evening was drawing close, so they would probably stay the night at an airship relay station.

It was just as Alnakk was thinking that.

A gunshot rang out.

Mostly out of reflex, Alnakk threw himself flat against his horse. He assumed that Salamand’s men had become desperate and were attacking them.

What he saw however as he half-lay on his horse was the sight of the princess’ horse rearing bolt upright and shaking her off.

The horse collapsed on its flank in the direction opposite where Princess Vileena had fallen. Blood was gushing from its belly.

While Alnakk looked on in shock, Tanis, who was beside him, jumped down from his own horse. Unbelievably, he was holding a smoking gun.

No way! –

Were words he did not even have the time to think.

The girl was not moving. Tanis raised his hand, the gun aimed at the princess.

His intention was clear.

“Stop!”

In that instant, propelled by fear that Tanis would do something that could not be undone, Alnakk nimbly leaped from his horse and rushed towards Tanis. Just before his finger touched the trigger, Alnakk hurled himself into him from behind. Tanis staggered but then immediately turned around and brandished the gun.

His face, as he started down the muzzle, seemed to have warped into that of a different person.

“I’ve no choice but to do this – I had no other choice. So move aside!”

He pulled the trigger.

A violent impact struck Alnakk in the shoulder and he fell to his knees. The shock had been so great it felt as though the right side of his body had been blown away.

A slew of blood from his shoulder had sprayed onto the collapsed princess, covering her from her face down to the nape of her neck.

The other Imperial Guards had finally regained their senses and were surrounding Tanis, each of them shouting his name.

While swivelling around, Tanis pointed his gun at them and kept them at bay.

“Don’t come near me – stay away!”

While the soldiers cautiously observed him, the distinctive sound of horses’ hooves thundering along the ground started to echo.

Looking towards it, they saw that Zenon and his group were galloping towards them from a hill to the south. They looked the very picture of an order of knights charging the enemy.

In the opening when Tanis was distracted, several Imperial Guards leaped on him from behind. One of them kicked the gun and sent it flying.

“Vileena!”

Urging his horse to a fierce speed, Zenon leaped off and all but dived to the ground. Without sparing a glance to his mount who was gathering momentum and galloping into the distance, he crouched down by his little sister’s side.

He looked down at her face, which was stained bright red down to her neck, but not with her own blood.

He could see no obvious injury, but, probably from having banged her head hard against her helmet, it looked as though she was barely clinging to consciousness. She needed to be examined by a doctor as soon as possible.

From here however, the closest, and safest, place for her to rest was Zaim Fortress.

“Zaim will take care of the princess for now. No objections?”

Even though Zenon asked that, it was not as though the Imperial Guards could refuse. The event which had just occurred had been completely unexpected for them. Having realised as much, Zenon did not question them any more than necessary.

For a moment, he hesitated about whether to take charge of the man who had shot at his sister. However, since Salamand was in Mephius’ custody, it might cause suspicions about whether Garbera was planning revenge. It was at that moment that he heard a weak voice.

“B-Brother...”

“Vileena,” Zenon quickly brought his face near hers. “Wait, don’t speak. I’m taking you to Zaim right now. Even if you say that you don’t want to, your brother does not want to hear it.”

Besides – he added in a low voice – it’s dangerous to go back to Solon now. I’m sure there

are factions in Mephius who want to destroy the alliance with Garbera. And if you nonchalantly return now, you might be taken as a hostage against Prince Gil.

Vileena seemed to give the slightest of nods. Despite her hazy consciousness, the one thing that did not waver was the thought that she must not become a hindrance for the crown prince.

She brought a trembling hand to her breast. From beneath the chainmail, she brought out the medallion and chain.

“This...” She turned towards the Imperial Guards. “Please take it... to His Highness Gil...” The medal shook as she held it out.

The Imperial Guards exchanged glances. Although they wanted to grant the princess’ wish, ‘taking it to His Highness Gil’ would mean leaving Solon and travelling all the way to Birac.

Nonetheless, a man’s hand wrapped around the medallion that was held out in mid-air.

“Without fail,” Alnakk swore.

He had no idea what was going on. He could not understand why his friend had attempted to kill the princess, nor could he judge whether it was alright to hand her over to the Garberan side like this. But when it came to this noble princess’ wish, he felt that he needed to fulfil it even if it meant staking his own life.

The medallion was smeared in blood. It was none other than Alnakk’s, but it looked exactly like the proof that the princess had fallen victim in battle.

Vileena gazed at Alnakk’s face with tremulous eyes. Her lips seemed to form the words: *thank you*. Then finally, her eyelids closed and, as though falling asleep, she lost consciousness in Zenon’s arms.

CHAPTER 7

ENVOY

PART 1

Salamand Fogel had been captured. Princess Vileena had been taken back by Garbera. Those two pieces of news flew around Solon at roughly the same time as each other.

Because the information had gotten mixed together, for a time, the rumour was that Mephius and Garbera had fought. Because of a gag order from the emperor, the Imperial Guards who had been present at the scene were vague about what had happened.

The garbled reports naturally made their way to all the other cities and before long, they had also reached Birac. Just as he had when the princess had absconded, Crown Prince Gil Mephius remained calm from start to finish. Outwardly, that is. Orba's inner state of mind was a whole different matter.

He had, of course, sent people to the Solon area to try and obtain information that was as accurate as possible, but currently, even the information flying around the capital was chaotic.

Unexpectedly, the one who had taken prompt action, at a time like this, was Gowen. He had taken the initiative to have his men and friends circulate reports throughout Birac that "it was Garbera's Princess Vileena who captured Salamand," in order to bolster the spirits of the crown prince's faction.

Orba heard that rumour through the grapevine. Ever since he had learnt of her departure from Birac, he had somewhat suspected that that was her intention. But it was an action so reckless and thoughtless that he almost wondered if she was planning to die.

No – while his head was almost boiling in anger, Orba's chest was chilled to the point of being freezing, and with it, there was also a part of his mind that could analyse the princess' actions. *She probably would be ready to cast her life aside.*

Having seen through Gil Mephius' impatience and anxiety, the Garberan princess had taken action to help reduce them. And she had chosen the dangerous and fierce method of leading soldiers and confronting the traitor head-on. Of course, it probably had not entirely been for the crown prince's sake. That girl had been endowed from birth with the perspective of royalty. It was an perspective that even Orba's hardships had not allowed him to acquire, he was not even sure he understood, and with which she saw a much wider world and future than he did.

The images of the western queen Marilène and the loyal Mephian retainer Simon Rodloom abruptly appeared in his mind. They had thrown away their own future, as well as the reputation they could have left for posterity, and had sacrificed themselves for what they believed in.

If it came to it, in a sense, Shique and the many soldiers who had died when Orba rose in rebellion were also the same. Vileena Owell might also have become one of them.

And now she was said to be in Garbera. There was a rumour that she considered herself to have fulfilled her obligations towards Mephius and had returned to her own country, but Orba did not believe it.

As if that idiot would be that reasonable. If she was that wise of a princess, it'd be a lot easier to deal with her.

He did not currently know the details, so all he could do was continue to gather information from the area around Solon. Now that Salamand was gone, they should be able to regain some momentum. The wind, however, had already changed once, and he was worried that now it would not blow in the direction he hoped for.

In that situation, someone new came to call on Birac. With his young and distinctly virile features, he gave the impression that he was there to volunteer as a mercenary, however he introduced himself as "from the Imperial Guards serving directly under the emperor." As proof of his position, he produced a handgun engraved with the crest of imperial family of Mephius.

"I wish to meet with His Highness," he informed the guards at the gate.

Although the soldier who took the gun into custody thought him really suspicious-looking, he had orders to – *report anything that catches your attention, no matter how trivial it is*. Orba had thoroughly hammered that into his men.

As a result, about an hour after the man had first appeared, the gun had passed into Gil Mephius' hands. From the looks of it, there did not seem to be any trick. However, contrary to expectations that he was an official envoy from the emperor, the man had apparently insisted that he was "a *former* Imperial Guard."

"I'll see him."

"It's dangerous," Pashir, who was with him in the room, said without a second's delay. "He is probably pretending to be disaffected with the emperor so that he can strike you when your guard is down."

"Even if that's the case, with you sitting in, it'll difficult for him."

Orba wanted information. Even if it was a trap or a lie, the very intention of whoever attempted either was information in and of itself. In this situation, in which waiting was impossible, intelligence gathering was the greatest weapon that Orba could collect, besides there were measures in place to ensure his defence.

The young man who was brought into the room gave his name as Alnakk. Being in his mid-twenties, he was certainly young, but the look in his eyes gave an impression of courage. His right arm, however, was bandaged and in a sling. Probably because he judged it suspicious, Pashir's vigilance only increased.

"So you're an Imperial Guard serving my father?"

"That was in the past... Right, it must be about a week since I left Solon."

"Then it wasn't that long ago. Why did you come here?"

"The princess of Garbera entrusted me with something for you, Your Highness."

"For me?" For a moment, Orba's voice almost rose in excitement but he just managed to bring it under control. "And why you?"

"I accompanied the princess on her subjugation of Salamand."

Alnakk then explained the sequence of events from the princess' audience with the emperor, to her leading a hundred Imperial Guards to face Salamand. And then –

"The princess was shot at by a friend of mine."

“What?” Lying on top of the desk, Orba’s fist twitched. He placed his hand on top of it as though to hold it down. “Say that again.”

“The princess was shot at. The bullet actually hit the horse she was riding on, but she was thrown from it and was, for a while, knocked almost unconscious.”

Since it was essential to bring her to safety as soon as possible, her brother, Prince Zenon, apparently took her to Zaim Fortress. Just before he did so, the princess entrusted Alnakk with:

“This.”

Alnakk carefully brought something out of his breast pocket and placed it on the desk. It was a gold medallion engraved with the flag of Garbera and stained slightly red.

The former Imperial Guard probably noticed the change in Gil’s expression.

“The blood does not belong to the princess. It’s mine,” he noted.

As though startled, Orba drew his eyes away from the medallion.

“I doubt you received Father’s permission to come here.”

“That is why I am a ‘former’ Imperial Guard. I do not have any family, so it will not cause any trouble to anyone.”

He spoke easily, but there was no doubt that he had risked his life by coming here. Even so, his expression was cheerful. Looking carefully, there were tears in his eyes.

“Please be at ease. I was ready to do – sorry – to undertake this even in exchange of my own life. I am truly glad that I was able to safely deliver the medallion into your hands, Your Highness.” His voice trembled.

Having done what he needed to, Alnakk turned to leave the office. Pashir stood next and was about to lead him out when –

“Your Highness,” Alnakk stopped abruptly and turned back.

“What?”

“No, nothing....”

“Say it.”

“I-In that case, please pardon my rudeness. Your Highness, please go fetch the princess sometime soon. I am certain that her intention is not to remain in Garbera. She surely wishes to return to Your Highness’ side. With that...” he said no more.

With an expression that could not even be called a strained smile, Orba waved his hand to urge Alnakk to leave.

The door shut.

Orba’s gaze was fixed intently on the medallion. It was a small thing, no more than five centimetres in diameter. The design was of a horse and sword at the centre, engraved with words meaning “eternal friendship”.

Orba’s eyes slowly became blurry.

Damn it, why?

An emotion so strong he could not understand it was burning at a point in his chest. In no time at all, it had sped to his heart and filled it.

I don’t get it.

He muttered inwardly.

The princess’ action – no, that wasn’t it. So why was it that the corners of his eyes were burning, why was he practically shaking from emotion?

In the end, Orba was not able to identify what it was.

Pashir led Alnakk through the mansion’s corridors. They had walked in silence until about halfway when Alnakk suddenly spoke.

“I’m surprised.”

Pashir sent him a searching glance. It's meaning was clearly *shut up*, but Alnakk paid no attention.

"You're this year's Felipe, aren't you – the runner-up at the gladiatorial tournament. I've only just noticed. Staggeringly good with a sword, but more importantly, the ring-leader who challenged Mephius."

"..."

"You were taken up by Crown Prince Gil Mephius and so avoided execution. And it looks like you're still following His Highness. So after all, is he that amazingly compelling, that he can fascinate and attract people?"

"Who knows," Pashir answered shortly. He seemed to take the chance to change the topic. "Enough about me. What are you going to do from now on? You can't go back to Solon."

"I'm not big on gambling or women, so the pay I've gotten until now will hold me for a while. After that, I might look for a position in Birac."

"You're not going to apply to be a mercenary?"

Pashir still had his suspicions about the man's real intentions. He took into consideration that Alnakk might have forged a connection to the prince thanks to the medallion so that, using it, he could then act as a spy or an assassin. However, Alnakk shook his head.

"That's... well, I'm also strong. I'm strong and I piled up achievements by taking one life after another, but being made an Imperial Guard actually took me away from fighting. Before, when there was talk about fighting breaking out in Nedain and how we might be ordered to march to the front any day soon, I suddenly got so scared it was unbearable. I'm not fit for war anymore."

A crease appeared in Pashir's brow. If what he said was true, this man was one hell of an eccentric.

"Hey there, Pashir. And this gentleman is?" Miguel, another eccentric of Pashir's acquaintance, called out to him from the other end of the passageway.

This former gladiator had taken part in the revolt against Mephius along with him.

Although he could have left when the prince's Imperial Guards were disbanded, the young man had given as reason for staying that "this seems more interesting." As a result of which he had gone through the unpleasant experience of almost being executed in Apta. You might have thought that he would have had enough by then, but he was still here in Birac, again with the position of an imperial guard.

"Everyone was making a fuss about an official envoy having arrived from Solon."

"I'm nothing that grand," Alnakk gave a wry smile. "I just came to make a personal delivery."

"What? And here I thought we were finally heading for a large-scale battle."

Blond-haired, blue-eyed Miguel Tes might look effeminate, but the truth was that he was an attention-seeker who was driven by the ambition of one day having his name resound throughout the whole world.

He was currently lamenting the fact that he had not done anything particularly noteworthy during the recent battle at Tolinea. Especially compared to Pashir, whose feats had been outstanding: he had come to the crown prince's aid when he had been in peril, and had then mowed down enemies at the vanguard. Miguel was jealous and envious of Pashir's achievements.

"Is it true that you're an Imperial Guard directly under the emperor's control? Everyone there's the hand-picked elite, right? How strong are they?"

Confronted with Miguel's persistent inquisitiveness, Pashir cleared his throat. Because of the way he had come calling, it was inevitable that Alnakk should be a topic of gossip. Still, they should not be loudly talking back and forth where there were eyes to see and ears to hear.

Just then, Alnakk suddenly halted.

"Miss," he called out.

Pashir and Miguel's eyes moved to one side. At a bend in the passageway was a young woman who looked like a lady's maid.

"Miss Layla, it's you, right?"

He was about to rush towards her, but the woman he had called Layla went so pale they could see it even at a distance and said, in a faint voice, “y-you have the wrong person,” before hurriedly turning around and leaving.

Alnakk ran after her for two or three steps, then stopped. Miguel tilted his head to one side.

“Is that a popular pick-up technique in Solon?”

“It’s nothing like that,” Alnakk answered with a serious expression.

“An acquaintance?”

“She... She looks a lot like one.”

This time, it was Pashir doing the asking and Alnakk who was giving short answers. He had indeed known Layla Jayce. Her father, Rone Jayce, had been his superior officer for a while and he had been invited to his house several times. He remembered being introduced to Rone’s daughter, and being told that she would soon be getting married.

Rone was a taciturn and stern superior, but at those times – and at those times only – his face was that of a gentle father. Then, he and his family had abruptly disappeared. And that, right after his daughter’s wedding ceremony.

The matter had never been officially announced however.

Naturally, all sorts of speculation had flown around. There were theories that he had been sent on a secret mission to a foreign country; that he had run away after committing some kind of crime; or even that, having provoked His Majesty’s wrath, he had been secretly executed.

And now, Layla was in Birac. Alnakk did not believe that it was a coincidental resemblance. That she had run away had only strengthened that conviction.

That being so, however, she must have her reasons for not wanting to meet an acquaintance from the past. It was, after all, abnormal for her to have vanished right after her wedding ceremony. So Alnakk had preferred not to question her.

Miguel had already lost interest and was asking Alnakk all sorts of things about the current situation in Solon, but Pashir, noticing Alnakk’s conflicted look, gazed warily

at the direction Layla had disappeared.

PART 2

This time around, he invited the four people for supper.

The four in question were Folker, Zaas, Yuriah and Walt. As usual, Orba had no intention of diving right from the start into the real issue, but then, the people present should have had a fair idea of what this was about. When they were roughly halfway through the meal, he asked –

“Have you changed your minds?”

“Of course not!”

It was Zaas who had come right out with that answer. The other three remained silent, although not for the same reasons, and the quality of each of their silences differed from the others. Folker had his eyes closed and seemed plunged into thought, Yuriah looked bewildered, and Walt sullen.

When the other three people failed to back him up, Zaas irritably got up from his chair and glared at them as though they were enemies.

“That’s fine,” said Orba. “Zaas, you’ll be free to leave tomorrow. Nedain, Solon – you can go wherever you want. Head back to your room and hurry up with your preparations.”

He had spoken so easily that Zaas was at a loss for words. He had vigorously risen from his chair as a way of forestalling Gil Mephius’ smooth-talking attempts at persuasion, so losing his target left him confused. Instead, it was Folker who, opening his eyes, asked –

“Is that alright?”

“If he hasn’t changed his mind, then there’s no help for it. Would you have preferred me to say I’d kill you if you didn’t obey me?”

“If nothing else, that would have been easier to understand.”

“Yeah, I’d probably think that too if I were in your shoes. But then, that would mean being the same as my father. And in that case, if I were to take Solon, there wouldn’t

be any great difference in Mephius' future... What is it?"

Orba scowled at Zaas. Still standing in front of his chair, Zaas Sidious looked completely at sea.

"W-What do you mean?"

"I told you to go back to your room. It should go without saying that I can't stand to feed freeloaders any more than this. Leave at once."

Zaas opened his eyes wide and goggled at him. He could not stop himself from muttering something but then soon strode out of the dining room and left, swinging his shoulders with a deliberately jaunty air. Folker seemed to laugh slightly, "what a harsh thing to say to young Zaas."

"He's also a general in charge of an entire division. Next time we meet, he'll probably have become a more formidable enemy," Orba gave a reply that was not really a reply, then, "how about you, all of you? Have you made up your minds to help me?"

"Regarding that... say I were, hypothetically, to agree," Folker retracted his smile and asked, "would you, Your Highness, trust us, we who had pledged our allegiance to His Majesty until just the day before?" "Saying that retainers shouldn't serve two masters sounds good, but..."

Orba brought Zaas' plate in front of him and ate the meat that was still on it. After that short interval passed, "That's the same as saying that you want to blindly trust someone and throw away your own ability to think. Right, you might as well say that you want to turn yourselves into slaves. I want retainers who think with their own heads and use their judgement to decide whether to swing their swords. Naturally, there will be times when I won't be able to tell you everything. I might be sparring with the information I share with you, or even give you an order and simply tell you to trust me. Or maybe even simply tell you to fight and die for the country."

"..."

"But say, for example, His Majesty the Emperor – in other words, your current liege – were to give you an order like 'believe in me and die for the sake of Mephius' future', would you obey? Would you be able to die believing that Mephius would definitely be a better place thanks to your death?"

Folker, Yuriah and Walt felt, with just a slight difference in its intensity, that a sword was being thrust into their chest.

“Then,” Folker leaned forward a little, “if it were Your Highness, could we go to our deaths feeling at ease?”

“That is for you to decide.” Orba’s attitude was like someone pushing away a hand that clung to him. “Perhaps nobody can say that for now. But, if you can look at me now and think that you place enough trust in me as a future ruler, then...”

“Then?”

“Lend me your help. I promise to become a ruler that you can entrust your lives to. And I want you to use your strength to help me become that kind of ruler.”

Folker suddenly opened his eyes wide and bent his neck backwards, exactly as though a flint had struck his forehead.

What do you intend to do after waging war on His Majesty? – It was the answer to the question that Folker had previously shot at him. When he had first been asked that, Orba had not been able to return a clear answer. However, the images of Simon, Vileena, and all the many others who had died in past battles had finally shown the way for him and become a light shining at his feet.

Meanwhile, ever since he had been taken captive in Birac, Folker had spent each day prey to inner turmoil. He did not believe that Mephius was currently fine, and at times he even felt a certain danger from the emperor, Guhl Mephius.

However, he had constantly been plagued with doubts about what would happen to Mephius “afterwards” if he were to criticise the emperor or openly go to war with him. Gil Mephius, the heir apparent, had been known as a feeble-minded youth and, just when he seemed to have started to garner some fame for his heroism, he had passed away from the world of the living. The imperial lineage could not be relied on, yet there did not appear to be anyone within Mephius who would be capable of ruling the country. If it really came down to it, Simon Rodloom, who had recently passed away in an accident, had been a very capable politician who had been deeply trusted by the retainers; but even so, it was uncertain whether he would have been able to carry the country. Above all, it had always been clear that he himself had no intention of doing so.

In which case...

In which case, even if it was under a reign of terror, even if it was under a dictator, the country was at least still held together.

No, it was probably not only Folker. Even though Mephius had lost countless able and talented people in the long war against Garbera, there were still plenty of statesmen and military men left who worried about their country's future. Did most of them not probably feel the same way as he did?

When Emperor Guhl obstinately wanted to continue the war with Garbera; when he forcibly dissolved the Council and concentrated all power in the hands of the imperial family; when slave revolts broke out throughout the country; and also, when he decided on an armed invasion of the west... There were many then who asked – *is this really alright?*

And who had come to the conclusion that – *there's no helping it 'for now'*. He himself had half-convinced himself of it.

While Folker Baran had been spending his time here in Birac, he had of course continued to think about it, but in the end, he had still reached the same conclusion. However, each time he did so, a voice in his heart asked –

But now. What about now, now that time has started moving?

The thought smashed Folker's skull with the weight of a steel sword and gouged out his heart with the sharpness of a spear.

Indeed, this was 'now.'

Crown Prince Gil Mephius had revived and revolted against his father, Emperor Guhl.

With only a small force, Gil had magnificently smashed through the army that the emperor had sent to suppress him. And, obviously enough, Folker himself had been defeated.

According to recent information, he had heard that the Garberan Princess, Vileena, had personally gone to reason with and drive back a scoundrel from her native land who had intruded upon Mephian territory. The young – or rather, the almost childlike – pair had now taken action. The old shell was being broken and new life was arising.

And thus, now.

Now, indeed.

Folker Baran drained his glass of its remaining water.

He inhaled, exhaled.

A sense of being refreshed spread to every corner of his chest.

“Understood.” Folker stood up as he spoke. He struck his right fist against his chest and clicked his heels together. “I, Folker Baran, will henceforth abandon my allegiance to the emperor and devote my life to Crown Prince – no, to Mephius’ future emperor, Lord Gil Mephius.”



In that instant, Walt leapt to his feet with the force of a gale. He parted his thick lips, looking ready to denounce Folker as an enemy...

“Likewise, I, Walt, will also devote my life to you.”

He stood in the same posture as the commander of the Black Steel Sword Division.

“L-Likewise, Yuriah Mattah.”

Setting aside Yuriah – the commander of the Bow of Gathering Clouds Division – who appeared to have been unable to hold out in that atmosphere, Walt’s decision was probably also the end of result of anguish and careful deliberation, and the gaze he turned towards Orba no longer held either animosity or desire for revenge.

“Good,” Orba also rose to his feet.

One after another, he took their fists in his hand and brought it to his own chest. It was the Mephian-style oath between lord and retainer.

Still wearing the mask of Gil Mephius, Orba said, “I will hold fast to your lives. To use them or throw them away depends on me. However, do not forget that you have eyes to ascertain how your lives are used, mouths to speak to me, and heads to think.”

After their discussion was over, Orba returned to his own room. With him were, of course, the guards that Pashir had assigned. This evening, one of them was a familiar face.

Miguel Tes. At the time of the Founding Festival, he had crossed swords with the masked Imperial Guard, Orba. Naturally however, he had not noticed that his current target for protection was the opponent he had fought against back then.

Pine torches and lamps had been lit all along the corridors. Perhaps because it was cloudy, the day had darkened early. The wind carried a hint of moisture and, unusually for the area, the temperature had dropped, so there might be rain coming.

He returned to his room. Miguel and the other guard stood on watch at the other side of the door.

“A change of clothes.”

Normally, Dinn, his page, would immediately have rushed up. The room was strangely silent.

Has he gone out?

Orba was about to continue to walk in without giving it any more thought when suddenly his feet halted. His nose twitched. As for why –

The room smells different – he sensed.

What, specifically, was different, he did not know. But his deeply-rooted survival instinct had been aroused.

There was clearly something different mixed in with the air he was used to smelling. Someone unfamiliar had set foot in the room. His eyes were suddenly pulled in a particular direction.

The desk he used for reading and writing. A carefully folded letter had been placed on top of it. He walked towards it and spread it open.

In that instant, the innumerable plans, stratagems and future expectations that he had built up from making Folker and the others his allies all soundlessly collapsed and vanished.

I know about you – it said.

It continued: Tonight, at the hour of the Two Dragon Eyes, I will be waiting at the old tower in the southwest corner of the estate. Come alone. If you do not, I will cancel this evening's appointment and will instead spread Your Imperial Highness' secret to the four corners of Birac.

For a while, Orba did not move a single muscle. The beating of his heart seemed to strike directly in his ears. As for the “secret”, there was only one he could think of.

That he was not Crown Prince Gil Mephius.

It was so very obvious that a somewhat bitter smile flashed across his face. His expression quickly tightened though. It was equally obvious that he could not allow

his real identity to be revealed at this stage of the game.

Who is it? Who could know about it?

To tell the truth, he did not have the confidence to say that his disguise was so flawless that nobody would be able to see through it. When he had been in Solon, he had tried to pay attention to even the smallest things, but after temporarily disappearing then reviving in Apta, he had certainly often overstretched himself. He had even taken a spear and fought at the front lines. He had undoubtedly done things which would have been inconceivable of the former Gil, who had been known as a fool.

If one were to suppose that he had, for example, deeply knowledgeable retainers, capable subordinates or strong backers, then what he done until then was still just barely within the realm of possibility. His action of heading towards the front and most dangerous place in battle, however, was something that those who knew the former Gil would find difficult to believe.

Moreover, there was something else that was unclear.

Do they know as far back as my being a sword slave and that the replacement happened at the time of the wedding ceremony with Vileena; or do they simply mean that the Gil who showed up in Apta is an impostor set up by Rogue and the others to oppose the emperor?

If it was the former, it meant that they had all of Orba's secrets in their grasp. If it was the latter, there was a high chance that it was at the level of their having suspicions.

Orba was of course not the real Gil, however the *current* Gil was the same as the one who had taken part in the pre-nuptial ceremony at Seirin Valley and who had been involved in everything since then. The circumstances around that were complicated and Orba's own thoughts became tangled.

I just don't know.

The tower at the southwest end of the estate must once have been used as a watchtower. Orba had a good knowledge of Birac since he had gone walking about a lot while staying there. After the extension works, the tower had become unnecessary and the lower floors were now used as a storehouse. It was a place that practically no one went to after the sun had set.

How many people could lie in ambush? It was not a very big tower. Even if the roof was made use of for lookouts, you could not fit in more than five or six soldiers.

Right.

Orba had made up his mind. It said to go alone. It had not been thirty minutes since he had seen the letter. And this had not given him much time in the first place. If he had been given a day or even half a day, he might have been able to come up with a plan, but as it was, every second counted.

Having set his mind, the tension that had been piercing his body and heart was replaced by the feeling of being full of energy. The sensation of having turned into a beast prowling in the fields looking for prey was oddly nostalgic.

It was a lot like the time he had been strutting around in Solon wearing the faces of both a gladiator and a crown prince, walking a tightrope on which he had to stay one step ahead.

I can't die – he thought. If he died, his slave brand would be discovered and his companions would be treated as no more than despicable traitors.

This time, his real identity might already have been discovered, which meant that – *I'm already as good as dead*. Orba smiled at the strange thought that was.

Unlike his earlier, bitter smile, this one was somewhat ferocious.

This time around, will I be buried as a corpse, or will I survive to rise again?

It felt as though this was the crucial moment to go through here in Birac, where time had held fast. When he placed his sword at his waist, Orba's mind tasted something close to ecstasy.

PART 3

The first thing he did was call for Miguel and the other soldier who were on guard at the door.

He ordered them to do a bunch of unimportant tasks. Bring him the duty roster for his personal guards since he wanted to rearrange it; ask the supervisor in charge of the army air carriers when he planned to finish replacing the parts on the new model of ships; and other similarly trivial tasks. Then –

“I’m so tired, I can’t keep myself awake. I want this all checked by the end of the day so go and get through it immediately.”

Since there was a lot to do, he ordered them to split the work between them. They looked disapproving, as expected.

“Commander Pashir gave us strict orders not to leave you.”

“Do you place Pashir’s orders above those of the crown prince?” Orba shouted angrily.

Miguel and the other one looked sour, but the tasks would not take more than a few minutes. The two of them left.

While they were gone, Orba changed clothes. He put on light armour and placed the iron mask over his face. He then waited about ten minutes outside the room for Miguel and the other to come back, at which point, he pretended to have only just come out the door.

“Oh? Iron Tiger. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Miguel raised his eyebrows. “What have you been doing up until now?”

“I received a secret mission from His Highness. Right, have you finished what he asked you to? He’s gone to sleep for the night. Says he’s leaving the rest to you.”

As he spoke, Orba brazenly walked up to them. The two men who had been made to run around at the prince’s whim shrugged and went back to stand guard in front of the door.

Orba went along the corridor and arrived at the entrance of the mansion. Recognising

him, the soldiers on regular guard duty naturally stood to attention.

He knew that they had just changed over at dusk, so even if Orba suddenly appeared, he did not need to worry that they would be suspicious about when he had entered the mansion.

He stepped out into the gardens.

A thicket of trimmed shrubs ran alongside the building. There was no one around. Orba squatted down beside them and removed the iron mask. He then headed towards the southwest tower.

A single drop of water splashed onto his shoulder. A light rain had begun to fall. The wind had also turned chilly.

However, with each step that he took, Orba's blood seemed to squirm noisily and his body temperature was on the high side.

Who would be waiting for him at his destination? An assassin sent by the emperor, or perhaps a traitor within their own camp? Or perhaps –

Garda.

The name flashed through his mind. He suddenly remembered the conversation he had had with the elderly strategist, Ravan Dol, when he had been to the west recently. An unidentified assassin had targeted Ax's life, and the one to drive them away had been yet another unknown person. As the latter had been leaving, they had mentioned that:

“Garda is still alive.”

It was Orba himself who had killed the sorcerer who had appeared in the west claiming to be Garda. If there was a plot to kill Ax, it would not be surprising if the assassins stretched their hands out towards Orba too. Sorcerers wielded mysterious powers. Perhaps they had realised that he had the same face as Gil Mephius when they were investigating around Orba.

Well, whatever.

Whether those waiting for him were assassins, sorcerers or members of the Ryuujin

tribe, he just needed to settle the matter with steel.

Fighting against the odds is business as usual.

He reached the tower.

He put his hand to the door. It opened unexpectedly easily. On the other hand, it was dusty inside. As he walked up the stair, cobwebs brushed against his head.

There was no light either. A faint light from a nearby mansion entered through a window above him, but visibility was dim. At the top of the tower, there was a room that the soldiers on watch had used to rest in.

So, would a demon appear or would it be a snake? Orba had been inwardly steeling himself for either, but when he finally reached his hand out and pushed open the door, he saw such a completely unexpected figure that his hand involuntarily tightened around the pommel of his sword.

It was Layla.

She was wearing clothes so flimsy that her skin showed through them. She drew near to Orba, her sensual body vividly displayed in the dim light.

Orba's eyes darted left and right. There were stone walls immediately to either side. It was a small room and it did not look as though anyone else was lurking within it.

Within the room, a single lamp had been hung. A cover had been draped over it, no doubt to prevent light from seeping outside, and it was faintly projecting onto the figure of the woman.

"Your Highness," Layla called out in a trembling voice.

If anything came, it would be from behind. Orba closed the door at his back.

"Your Highness," Layla once again called out to him. "Why do you look at me with the eyes of one looking at a stranger? Do you not remember me, Your Highness?"

"Was it you who sent the letter?"

"So after all, even though you did something so horrible, I'm just a commoner girl

unworthy of being taken. Will you say that it was not something important enough to be caught in any of the folds of your memories, Your Highness?"

She came closer by another step. Her voice and her entire body were shaking. It did not look as though she was wearing a weapon.

"What are you talking about?"

"You hateful person!" Layla spat out in a loud voice as she twisted her body. "You led me to ruin. You, the successor to a great dynasty... simply on a whim, simply playing around... I had just had my wedding ceremony and you wanted to force me to sleep with you."

Layla...

At that moment, with startling abruptness, the name suddenly rose to the surface of Orba's mind.

He had once gone out to Solon with the crown prince's step-sister, Ineli, and several of his companions. The main purpose had been to accept an invitation from the veteran general, Rogue – the same one who was currently fighting alongside Orba.

On the way back, they had been surrounded by armed ruffians. Looking back on it, the origin of that had been a scheme laid by one of those noble wastrels. The people that he had paid to hire, however, had trampled over that noble's expectations and had tried to take Ineli and the others hostage.

Whereupon, the noble boy had revealed his name.

"T-The one over there is His Highness Crown prince Gil!"

He had probably intended to intimidate their attackers, but instead, one of the men had flown into a rage.

"Gil Mephius. The bane of Layla, you won't escape!"

Orba had allowed Ineli and the others to run away then had dealt with their opponents. He had extracted information at gunpoint from the man who had called him "the bane of Layla."

That was all the man knew. The officer from the Imperial Guards and his family had vanished from Solon a few days later. It had even been said that they had been killed in order to ensure their silence, and so those who had been connected to that wedding had chosen to wipe the event from their memories. Because of it all, the man had lost the will to work and had started resorting to thievery.

That was Layla.

Taking advantage of Orba's momentary surprise, Layla leapt towards him. The feel of warm flesh enveloped him.

The older girl was clinging to his chest, weeping. Just as he was about to shove her away, he felt a prickling sensation near his armpit.

He instinctively thrust her away by the shoulders.

Layla staggered back and fell to the floor in a large cloud of dust, but when she stood back up, her expression held neither surprise nor reproach. Her lips were merely curved into the slightest of smiles. Orba was going to say something, press her for answers. He was not able to do either of those things.

The world seemed to suddenly violently lurch up and down, his knees lost their strength and he dropped down to them, almost collapsing altogether.

"What did you..." He could not even form his words properly. His tongue was numb and had lost all sensation. It was the same for the area around his mouth and he did not even know if his own mouth was open or shut, so every time he tried to speak, saliva dripped from it. Contrary to his sluggish body, one word was flashing and flickering ferociously in his mind: *poison*.

He tried to walk towards Layla. He collapsed after just three steps. Despite his loss of bodily sensation, the floor seemed to have melted into mush and he could not even walk straight.

At some point, a dagger had appeared in Layla's grasp. There was a crest etched into the sheath. The emblem of the imperial family of Mephius. It was something that her father, Rone Jayce, had received when he became an officer of the Imperial Guards.

The blade that slid out caught the faint light of the lamp and gleamed. Slumped forward as he was, Orba just managed to stretch out his hand to the sword at his waist.

For a moment, his fingers groped about in thin air. At long last, they came into contact with the hilt.

At the same time, Layla clenched the dagger in an underhand grip and lunged forward. At that instant, although separated by time and space, Gil and Vileena, the two whose countries had decided on their engagement, became similarly caught up in an assassination plot.

He rolled away to avoid it. From a crouching position, he drew his sword. While he staggered from its weight, he extended a foot forwards to brace himself. The world was still trembling. He just barely managed to maintain his stance.

Layla sprang forward once more.

Sword and dagger collided. Since his opponent was a young woman, normally she would have been blown away in an instant, but now, they were competing at almost the same strength.

No, Layla actually seemed to be pushing him back. As both blades shook incessantly, the dagger drew ever closer to Orba's neck.

Her entire face covered in beads of sweat, her expression transformed into ferociousness, Layla's smile widened. But by being able to lean all of his weight towards his opponent in that time, Orba had been able to recover his balance. He halted his breathing and wrung out the strength in his abdomen.

Layla was knocked backwards. Orba's sword hummed. Her expression of pain was swiftly replaced by one of terror.

Orba!

At that moment, he felt as though a woman's voice struck his ears. Orba gasped and halted his sword.

That voice he had heard was Alice's. It was not just her voice. Layla's very expression as she remained frozen in fear was that of the girl who had been his childhood friend.

Why?

Dragged down by the weight of the sword he had swung overhead, Orba could no

longer stand and once again fell backwards.

His breathing was ragged. His heart was pounding so violently it seemed to be outside of his body. And he had strange feeling of pain, as though his swollen blood vessels were about to burst through his skin at any moment.

Ah! – amidst his flickering consciousness, Orba suddenly understood.

This was the very scene that he had watched over and over in his nightmares, unable to do anything. In the burning village, a soldier from the Black Armoured Division was catching up to Alice, who was trying to run away. She had fallen down and, with a vulgar smile, the soldier raised his bloodied sword towards her.

It was not a scene that he could have seen with his own eyes, but it was a nightmare that would replay on nights when he could not sleep easy, and it had now been instilled into his mind with the realism of an actual memory.

Thinking about it, Layla and Alice were women in similar circumstances. Purposefully or on a whim, a handful of those who held power had, out of greed and lust, driven their lives off the rails. What was the difference between the revenge Layla had sworn, and the revenge Orba himself had accomplished?

Layla slowly lifted herself up. The still gleaming dagger was a sharp light penetrating Orba's hazy consciousness.

The shadows of several people raced beneath the starlight.

They were disguised as soldiers, and if someone had called out to halt them, they would surely have realised their faces were unfamiliar. However, there was no one else nearby.

The place they were heading to was the mansion's southwest tower – in other words, where Orba and Layla were.

The lead shadow stretched its hand out towards the door.

Orba was not aware of the sound of someone running up the stairs, or that of the door being flung open. With the speed of a wild beast swooping down onto its prey, the person threw themselves at Layla's back just as she was about to swing her dagger down towards Orba.

Layla's body flew over Orba and rolled to the floor like a bundle of hay propped against a wall.

"Pa...shir," Orba muttered in a hoarse voice.

It was indeed Pashir. Having witnessed the scene between Alnakk and Layla, he had been keeping an eye on her just in case. Having received a report that she had headed alone towards this tower, he had hurriedly returned from patrol duty and had only just made it in time.

"Are you alright, Prince?"

"Pashir!"

This time, Orba raised his voice with all his strength as several shadows lurking in the darkness leapt out behind Pashir. If it had been anyone other than Pashir, their neck and chest would instantly have been sliced through. Sparks flew as he raised his sword without bothering to turn around to look.

As soon as one was defeated however, another rushed into the room. There were a further two or three behind him. It was pure luck that, in that instant, Orba managed to raise his sword up and parry a blow aimed at his face.

The enemy were outfitted like Mephians, but they swarmed around Orba without a single yell of self-encouragement, or a single threatening word. These were the movements of trained assassins.

Orba edged back towards the wall. Not because he was cornered, but because he wanted to get rid of the blind spot at his back.

Oh – the eyes of one of the assassins gleamed.

The tip of a blade moved to the right, feinted, then fell to the left. Orba drove it back. He had not chased it with his eyes. From the experience of countless battles piled up in his memories, he had guessed – or rather, he had almost been certain – what the

enemy's movements would be.

However, now that he had no strength in either his arms or legs, stopping blow after blow was heavy-going.

Sitting where she had slammed into the wall, Layla watched Orba desperately put up a resistance. The smile on her lips had all but vanished.

Just like Orba, who was suffering from having been poisoned, she was far from being in her usual state. She was hypnotised. The intent to kill Gil Mephius was occupying the upper surface of her consciousness. Although that aim had all but been accomplished, her breathing was ragged and her eyes were open as wide as they could be. There was no sense of relief flooding her chest.

Why? Layla wondered hazily.

What she felt instead was loss. It was a feeling she had already experienced time and time again. She had lost her home country and her fiancé. Her father was almost killed before her eyes. She had seen the western people, who had taken care of her, be hurt.

No, this... was not what she was feeling. In the part of her mind that should have been utterly occupied by the desire to kill, the solitary figure of the Garberan princess flickered like smoke from a flame.

The Princess had headed to Solon and, according to what she had heard, she had confronted Salamand's forces. At the same time, she had been shot and taken to Zaim Fortress. There were no doubt many reasons for why the princess had taken those actions, but one of those must surely be because it was for Gil Mephius.

She would lose him.

That girl would experience the same sense of emptiness that Layla had.

A mysterious and unstoppable urge welled up from deep within her.

While her desire to kill Gil was genuine, her conviction that she had to prevent him from being killed was equally genuine. It was contradictory, but then people were always creatures who could hold conflicting emotions.

The intensity with which they clashed, however, was far greater than anything Layla

had ever experienced until then. If it carried on for too long, it might destroy the body and mind of the vessel called Layla.

Which was why it was easier to abandon her mind to another. It was better to simply indulge in the desire to kill Gil. For the sake of revenge at having lost everything.

But the feelings that went against that were also strong. She was terrified of losing a relationship that she had just barely managed to forge.

At that moment, a scream tore out from Layla's mouth.

At the same moment, in the arboretum within the mansion's courtyard, a shadowy person remained as still as a statue. It was Zafar.

Standing next to the fence, he closed his eyes and raised both hands to chest-height, and placed his fingers into a complicated pattern.

It could be said that he was also in a state of self-hypnotism. Zafar was carefully "watching" the events within the tower through Layla's eyes. Just a little more and the crown prince's assassination would be complete...

"Who are you?"

A voice suddenly called out from behind him. For all that he was a user of sorcery, Zafar had not noticed anyone approach him. He whirled around incredulously and his eyes fell on a figure that surprised him even more.

"Barbaroi!"

The word unintentionally burst from his lips. With an equally instinctive movement, he jumped backwards.

The one who had appeared among the shadows was a young girl with dark brown skin – Hou Ran.

Having stayed in the dragon pens until late, she had noticed that there was something unusual about the dragons. Ran herself had once told Vileena that the very bodies of dragons were endowed with ether. Because of that, they were sensitive to its flow.

Without paying any attention to the guards who tried to stop her, Ran took one of the small-sized Fey dragons out of its cage and had gone looking around the mansion.

It was that Fay which had sniffed out Zafar with the sense of smell peculiar to dragons.

“Damn it!”

Zafar seemed to hesitate for a moment as to what would be the best thing to do, but then made up his mind and cleared the fence that was as high as a person in one leap, then darted away with hurried steps.

In that instant, his power of control weakened. In the struggle that had been taking place within Layla, one of the conflicting feelings finally won over. And that made her move in a way that she herself would not have expected.

She threw herself amidst the gleaming steel.

His mind still in a haze, Orba watched her do so. It was almost as though her body were drawn to that weapon-filled space. The assassins’ swords were going to smash through her skull from either side.

For a moment, the scene was reflected in Orba’s eyes as though everything had slowed down.

Layla’s figure seemed to overlap with that of another person. This time, it was not Alice, but the figure of his mother who, when he had been a child, had tried to protect him when their house had been attacked by Garberan soldiers.

Shit!

Black flames instantly burst up within Orba’s veins. It was only for a moment, but as they coursed once around his body, they took with them the paralysis and numbness that was holding him down. Before he even realised it, his foot had kicked against the floor and he was grasping Layla tightly as he rolled in mid-air.

A sword swung down at his back.

His clothes tore and blood sprayed.

He was lying face downwards and pressed against Layla, and the assassins once again rained their naked blades down towards him. They were so close and so fast that they could no longer be avoided.

In that moment when he was finally about to sever the life of the false crown prince, one of the assassins, whose mind no less than his body was supposed to have been trained to its utmost limits, opened his eyes wide in shock. Even in the darkness, his eyes could clearly make it out.

“Wait!”

He held back his companion who had likewise been about to give Orba the finishing blow. The other man also halted his steps when he saw what his comrade had.

His clothes were ripped and Orba’s violently heaving back was exposed to the air. On his back across which blood was trickling was, unmistakably, a slave brand.

“The plan has changed,” said one of the assassins in a low, viscous-sounding voice. “Don’t kill him. We’re capturing that man.”

As he spoke, he kicked Orba’s arm and made him release his sword. He had probably exhausted all his physical strength and did not move even as the man was about to seize him by the scruff of his neck.

At that moment, Orba unleashed his last remaining strength. He drove the dagger that he had taken from Layla deep into the assassin’s heart.

The man died without having time to shout out in pain, and Orba used his corpse as a shield to deflect the blow that came from the man behind him. Whereupon, Pashir, who had finally won his fights near the entrance to the room, came running up and, with the swiftness of a gale, promptly cut down the two remaining men.

The fighting and secret assassination attempt on the crown prince were swallowed by the shadows at Zafar’s back as he ran and soon disappeared from sight. He was far swifter than would be expected from his appearance.

As he raced through the dark town and past the loitering drunkards, Zafar’s head was still reeling from the shock of having met that girl earlier.

The plan had failed. While on the one hand, he was feeling a strong sense of personal failure, it was not as though there had been no results at all. As evidence of that, as he approached the town's back alleys –

"I saw."

Zafar's lips twisted into the shape of a smile.

"We do not need to intervene. By following its inevitable course, the stream of History will soon remove that obstacle."

Orba was lying in a pool of blood. His entire body was covered in it, as well as in sweat. His breathing was ragged. Layla was once more leaning against the wall, apparently asleep.

Amongst the people who were in uproar after having woken up and learned that there had been an assassination attempt against the Crown prince, Pashir left, carrying Orba on his back.

"I heard it before," he commented in a whisper. "Why do I keep following you, was it? Then can I ask something? *Since when?* And *for how long* are you going to be the crown prince?"

He had guessed it for a while now. On a past battlefield, when Gil Mephius had been in danger, Pashir had heard the gladiator called Shique cry out, "Orba!" Suddenly, all the things which gave him a sense of unease made sense. Even if it was absurd, it had to be the truth.

And today, Pashir had seen the slave brand with his own eyes. Orba, still being carried on Pashir's back, still breathing unevenly, replied something. Then he suddenly went quiet. He seemed to have fallen unconscious.

I see.

Pashir answered anyway.

"In that case, me too. Instead of throwing Mephius to the flames, I'll watch a new Mephius being born. Even if it means risking my life. Don't ask why. You wouldn't

answer either if I asked you that.”

EPILOGUE

It was ten days since Princess Vileena had flown to Solon by way of Nedain.

Jairus Abigoal had been anticipating a possible shift in the situation, but the Impostor Crown Prince's troops still maintained their camp in the hills near the city. The first wave of reinforcements from Solon, comprising a thousand soldiers, had recently arrived, but the anticipated additional troop of a thousand five hundred had yet to arrive.

On top of that, Jairus had to maintain a vigilant gaze not only on those outside the city walls, but also on those within. Even he was aware that the massacre at the quarry had stirred up even greater anger and displeasure among the townspeople than usual.

That damn Boyce.

They had only needed to execute one or two of the ringleaders, but his son had struck down every single person who had taken part in the rebellion. To make matters worse, he had forcibly taken a girl of the Badyne faith and had declared that he would make her his wife. Jairus was usually indulgent with his son, but this time, he had been forced to rebuke him.

With these added domestic troubles, Jairus' patience was just about reaching its limit when, in the early morning, he received a report that the enemy army had started to move.

Jairus and Boyce, father and son, both hurriedly leapt out of bed.

Odyne Lorgo's troop of a thousand had started advancing while firing their cannon.

"Stupid," growled Jairus while he got dressed as quickly as he could. "So they've finally gotten impatient and made their move."

It seemed that Odyne wanted to lure them out. They halted and mounted their guns at their furthest possible range. Jairus, however, did not answer the provocation and issued the order to return fire from Nedain's southwest battery.

The roar of cannon fire resounded from both sides; but the Nedain side, from its

hillside position, had the longer range, and the Impostor Crown Prince's army could not step a single foot forward.

After having fired five or six bombardment rounds, the crown prince's forces pulled back temporarily, then, less than an hour later, they started again only for things to end in the same way and for them to scatter into small groups.

"The hell, where's their discipline?" Boyce, clad in full armour, had only just thrown himself onto his horse when he learned of the enemy's retreat and, wound up as he was, he was baying for blood. "Father, I'll give chase. I'll be sure to teach them that they won't take a step further east than Nedain."

"No," Jairus shook his head. "The enemy is baiting us. Once they've pulled us in, they'll spring a trap."

The Impostor Crown Prince had defeated Folker's large force. Jairus had no intention of underestimating him. Boyce on the other hand snorted, as though displeased. He could not help but want to repay Odyne in kind for what had happened last time.

However, while on the surface, Odyne's actions were reckless and foolish, there was of course an underside to them. He was buying time for their detached force, so that the enemy would not get wind of their movements. While Odyne's troops were hurling cannonballs, a unit of six hundred men was travelling east behind them, along the River Zwimm.

The mountains north of Nedain created a fortification for it. In spite of that, or rather, for that very reason, the troop of six hundred had deliberately chosen to go along the steep mountain trails.

Raymond Peacelow was the one guiding them. He had collected information about every nook and cranny of the mountain's topography from the villagers who lived there. Well-acquainted with the local terrain and loved by the local people, the task was ideally suited to him.

The troop he was guiding attacked Nedain from the rear in the early afternoon.

They immediately swarmed towards the gates, where, first, they raised their banners; Mephius' national flags billowed grandly in the clear sky alongside the ones depicting the family crest of their commander. Next, they turned their guns heavenwards and pulled the triggers.

The sound of gunshots overlapped.

When the horrified soldiers in Nedain saw the flags fluttering on the other side of the gates, they were left even more stunned.

“T-That...”

“That’s General Baran’s banner, isn’t it?”

“We’re being attacked by Folker Baran!”

When he received the news, not even Jairus could hide his shock.

“If it’s Folker then...”

Has he changed sides? No, impossible, he’s...

But even if he thought that, the Impostor Crown Prince’s army had, from the start, counted among its ranks the veteran general Rogue, who had served Mephius for many long years, and the straight-laced military man Odyne – people whose betrayal was inconceivable to anyone who knew them.

Maybe that rumour that the false crown prince uses western black magic isn’t a lie after all. The thought flitted through his mind, but anyway, for now they needed to deal with the enemy at their rear.

Meanwhile, the fact that Folker Baran had purposefully revealed himself during the surprise attack was neither out of vanity nor a desire to play fair.

It was a signal.

At the same time as Folker raised his flags, flames also rose throughout the city. Not because of gunfire or shelling from the crown prince’s forces – the ones who had lit those fires were the townspeople of Nedain themselves.

The people had risen in revolt.

This was the living embodiment of all the long preparations that Gil Mephius – or rather, Orba – had made. He had not wasted his time idly remaining in a stand-off. He had gotten some of his subordinates, and men who had been recruited from the

villages, to conceal themselves within the city and there, along with gathering information, they had set up the preparations for this uprising. Within the city, anger and distrust against the Abigoal family had naturally been smouldering like live embers. All they had to do was blow on them.

“Down with the Abigoal tyranny!”

“The bastard struts about like an emperor. He acts like Nedain is the whole of Mephius and he’s Emperor Guhl Mephius himself!”

“He thinks that the assets, the harvest, and the lives of the people of this land are all his.”

“If we let him, he’ll squeeze Nedain dry!”

Their voices rose simultaneously, they lifted their weapons overhead and, throughout the city, riots sprung up.

Under their guidance, Nedain’s northern gate was opened from inside. Six hundred cavalrymen, led by Folker Baran, entered through them. Walt, accompanied by a further two hundred infantrymen followed.

The soldiers defending the city hurriedly rushed to intercept them, resulting in a violent clash along the paved streets.

From the houses on either side, the townspeople grabbed bricks, pots, stones, and anything they could catch hold of that could be used as a weapon, and hurled them down from above at the defending soldiers. Trivial as the they were, they were more than effective enough. In no time at all, the Nedain side found itself at a disadvantage.

When Jairus heard about it, he ordered his son Boyce to go and help them. Furthermore, he requested that the soldiers who had come in reinforcement from Solon assist in fending off Folker Baran.

The one leading those soldiers was, aptly enough, a commander of a thousand called Drake, who was the second-in-command to one of the twelve generals.

“We will wait and avoid sending in all of our troops. The enemy intends to attack with its main force as soon as we turn our attention inwards,” he warned Jairus.

In the end, they only sent two hundred soldiers to suppress the riots, while the remainder did not move from their position at the front of Nedain.

Jairus was openly furious, but then one of his retainers, his face turning pale, spoke in a low voice:

“Could it be that that Drake fellow is in league with the Impostor Crown Prince?”

“What! What do you mean?”

According to reports from the soldiers, it seemed that the populace involved in the uprising had been saying that there was some sort of arrangement with the soldiers from Nedain’s side. “Even if soldiers come, don’t be afraid and hold out. Remain patient until that person takes action,” they said.

Hearing that, a thought suddenly occurred to Jairus. For some time now, Drake had been voicing complaints about how his soldiers had been received. According to him, neither the meals nor the alcohol were adequate, and the provisions for weapons and ammunition were insufficient.

Now that the port of Birac had been lost, the number of soldiers gathered in Nedain was more than what that rural town could sustain. Even so, he had several times heard rumours of Drake saying behind his back that the lack of resources was due to Jairus, the fief lord’s, incompetence.

In point of fact, Orba was the one who had arranged for the rumours to be circulated.

However, having witnessed for himself that the ever calm and collected Folker had turned traitor, Jairus could not say for sure that the rumour was merely baseless slander spread by the enemy.

Therefore –

“More enemy troops have arrived from the southwest!”

“The banner is... Crown Prince Gil Mephius!”

– When Odyne’s unit, which was supposed to have been routed, gathered once more with Gil Mephius at its head – in other words, when things developed just as Drake had indicated they would – Jairus did not attribute it to Drake’s penetrating insight,

but instead concluded that: *the bastard really has double-crossed us.*

“Close the gate. The first thing is to concentrate all our forces on Folker and the mob. Hurry and send a call for reinforcements to Solon!”

Jairus’ orders were immediately put into effect. As a result of which, Drake was shut out of Nedain and, unable to oppose the crown prince’s forces head on, this time around, he was the one whose troops dispersed into small groups.

Leading the troops on horseback was Gil Mephius – in other words, Orba. He had broken away from the vanguard and cut down two or three riders from Drake’s unit.

“Don’t be reckless, Your Highness.” Pashir, also on horseback, was sticking close beside him. So close that there was no space even for an arrow to pass between them, and it did not look like he intended to leave the prince’s side for even a moment. “Your health is still...”

“I’m fine. More importantly, move further away. It’s suffocating to have you stick this close to me.”

Despite what Orba said, Pashir was understandably uneasy. After all, it had not even been five days since the assassination attempt in Birac.

Orba had deliberately avoided making any official statement about it. He had allowed the rumour to circulate throughout Birac, but he himself had neither confirmed nor denied it.

It’s obvious that their goal was assassination. But they weren’t intending to use a lethal poison.

And indeed, poisoning left a greater impression than the fear of being attacked head-on, and evoked the image of a powerful personage operating from the shadows. The emperor was afraid that using those kinds of means would further harm the imperial family’s prestige. That he was being careful about such a trivial concern meant that Guhl was aware of how precarious the imperial family’s position – which was to say, his own position – currently was.

Although, with that said, there was a lot about that incident that even Orba did not understand. Even though it was certain that Layla was one of the ringleaders, at the last moment, she had tried to shield the crown prince. After the event, she had been

restrained and cross-examined, but what she said never went to the heart of the matter.

Still, this had clearly demonstrated the emperor's "weakness".

Orba put off elucidating the truth of the matter and pressed on with the final preparations in Birac. He had received reports that the manoeuvring in Nedain had been completed, which also reinforced his decision to finally move his troops.

Salamand, one of the obstacles that had been preventing Gil from taking action had now been removed.

The 'wind' blowing through Mephius had once more grown chaotic. So in order to turn that 'wind' in his favour, he needed another military gain.

The princess opened the way. With that thought in his heart, Orba issued a series of orders to Odyne, Folker, and Walt.

And now, when he gauged that not a single one of Drake's soldiers remained in sight, he yelled –

"Bring out the dragon tank."

What advanced to the echoing clatter of its wheels was a mechanical dragon. Pulled along by several Baians, the huge construct had towers in which soldiers were riding and rams for battering down gates. Taúlia had used it to attack Apta. From what Orba had later learned, it had been designed by the strategist, Ravan Dol. Once on the receiving end of that weapon, Orba had been given it by Ravan himself when he went to pay a visit to Taúlia.

Sitting astride a small-sized dragon, Hou Ran directed the other dragons and had them ram the huge tank into Nedain's main gate. The reason they were not using guns to do so was for fear of causing damage within the city.

The gate was smashed through on the second strike. The riflemen riding in the towers then simultaneously opened fire on the area behind the gate. Hearing the succession of gunshots, Orba raised his sword high and shouted,

"Charge!"

As he swung his sword downwards, he felt the firm touch of his chainmail, shaking as though to oppose his movements.

The fighting came to an end before sunset.

With riot after riot occurring throughout the city, Folker's troops coming from the north, and the crown prince's attacking from the southwest, even if Nedain's soldiers had been able to compete in terms of numbers, they still would not have stood a chance.

Although Gil Mephius was at the head of his troops when he ordered the charge, his sword actually barely dipped in blood. In almost a flash, the main force had surrounded the residence of the lord of Nedain, and by the time they met up with Folker's troops, the Abigoal family had already been captured.

Gil Mephius and his men were greeted with explosive cheers from the townspeople. These were entirely different from the ones they had received in Birac, where the groundwork had been laid in advance and the people had mostly been cheering out of a sense of duty. Here, villagers who had been trampled underfoot by the Abigoal father and son were also mingled among the crowd; and, looking as though they truly believed that things would be better from now on, they wept, embraced one another, and shouted out Prince Gil's name from the bottom of their lungs.

White smoke was still rising here and there around the city, but the people and Orba's soldiers were working to extinguish the fires.

Raymond Peacelow was given the honour of riding directly behind Gil Mephius. Showered in acclamations of joy, Raymond was in tears as he rode along.

If only Dolph, the villagers, and all the others could have been here to share this moment – was the thought that would not stop flowing through his mind.

But it was still too soon to allow himself to indulge his sentiments. There was still a mountain of things that Raymond needed to ascertain with his own eyes, hear with his own ears, and set out to accomplish here, within Nedain.

Jairus and Boyce were being held in a room of their residence. They had been discovered by some of Odyne's soldiers when they had been attempting to escape by the back entrance. In the end, they had been brought back to the mansion surrounded by armed soldiers. However, in a way, that was probably fortunate for them. If even a single one of Nedain's people had caught sight of them, it would not have been surprising for the two of them to be in the process of being tortured to death right about now.

Louise Peacelow, who had been captured along with them, was also in the room. Her face as white as a sheet of paper, she hung her head and did not speak a single word.

The Abigoal father and son had, for a time, been dispirited by the rapid reversals of their fates. By now however, Boyce Abigoal was lamenting in vain over what could no longer be changed.

"If only you'd given the order to pursue them back then. Because of your indecisiveness, Father, we had to watch ourselves get caught in the enemy's trap."

"Shut up, Boyce." Jairus' normally well-oiled moustache now clung to the sides of his mouth because of how much he was sweating. "If you say anything more, for all that you're my own flesh and blood, I won't let it slide."

"Let it slide?" Boyce's sneer was tinged with desperation. "You're not lord of Nedain anymore. There's no longer a single soldier for you to give orders to, or a single page to help look after you."

"You little..."

While the blood-related parent and child were glaring at each other so fiercely that it seemed as though they might come to blows at any moment, Gil Mephius' arrival was announced.

Taken aback, the two of them stopped moving. The door opened.

"Make yourselves comfortable," said the young man who entered as he sat down on a chair that a page had gotten ready for him.

Their mouths agape, Jairus and Boyce were unable to decide what attitude to take. They were the commanders of the defeated army, but more importantly, the youth resembled Crown Prince Gil Mephius far more than either of them had been expecting.

Even Jairus, who had frequently had the opportunity to meet the real prince at court, was unable to differentiate between the two of them.

Could it be... The thought was apparent on both their faces.

Before either of them could speak, another person entered the room. Without either announcing himself nor greeting the prince, he rudely came barging in, shouting, "Boyce, you bastard!" and suddenly struck Boyce.

Ah! A silent scream rose to Louise's throat.

Boyce tumbled to the floor. Prince Gil was completely unperturbed by this extremely rude behaviour. Raising his eyebrows slightly, he simply restrained Raymond, who was about to start straddling Boyce, by catching hold of his shoulder.

From above the red-faced and half-astounded Boyce, Raymond, having been stopped, glared. He had stopped by his own mansion on the way and had heard from the servants what Boyce Abigoal had done.

"That was rude," said Gil, cool and calm to the last, "but it seems my subordinate had good reason to hit you."

"W-What kind of stupidity is that? If I'm to receive even more shame than that of being taken prisoner, I'd rather fight and die!"

Boyce was not giving in either. As he lifted his large body up, he jabbed a finger towards Raymond's narrow chest.

The atmosphere surrounding the two gave the impression that they might start trying to kill each other at any moment.

"A duel." Far from trying to stop anything, Gil came out with something unexpected. "Let's go with a duel. Apparently they were popular in Garbera in the old days. In a situation in which neither of two people could yield without forfeiting their pride and dignity, they would fight it out with swords in front of witnesses. The winner had the right to give the loser a single order, that could be whatever they wanted. That fine with you, Raymond?"

"I-It's exactly what I want."

“Boyce?”

“Fine.”

At that point in time, Boyce was not in a normal frame of mind. He could not come to grips either with the reality of his defeat or with the fact that there was nothing left to hope for from the future.

Thereupon, Gil Mephius drew the sword which was at his own waist.

“Well, standing in for Raymond Peacelow, I, Gil Mephius, will be your opponent. Dinn!”

When he called out, a pageboy brought a sheathed sword to him and was told to hand it to Boyce.

“Y-Your Highness...” Raymond seemed bewildered, but Gil shook his head.

“Just as for a sword dance, there is no shame in having someone stand in for you. I guarantee both your honour and your dignity.”

Boyce wordlessly took the sword. Although at first he had been bewildered, the look in his eyes changed as soon as he had steel in his hand.

Then instead... He burned with the ambition to kill the Impostor Crown Prince.

His father, Jairus, had been thrown into complete confusion and even Louise, not seeming to notice that her brother Raymond was coming to stand beside her, had her astounded gaze glued on the two who were facing off at the centre of the room.

First, they lightly crossed swords.

In that moment, Gil Mephius gave a soundless, scornful laugh.

What’s so funny? His eyes flaring, Boyce suddenly unleashed a killing blow.

Gil soared backwards. He had easily avoided it, but Boyce’s moves did not stop there. He exerted his large build into delivering one heavy-looking blow after another. Gil avoided every one of them, perhaps because his slender body risked being blown away if they crossed swords.

Raymond watched nervously. He could not bear to close his eyes. He was afraid that something that could not be undone would happen to the prince the moment he stopped looking.

“Uwah!”

With a cry, Boyce toppled forward. He had been sidestepped just as he was lunging for his opponent’s chest. He hurriedly turned around, to find the gleaming tip of a sword right at his neck.

“Ten years.” The man who called himself Gil Mephius once again laughed derisively. “Give it ten years, brat. Then come and try again.”

“What!”

Boyce flung back the sword tip at his throat and swiped out with his blade straight in front of him.

Gil again jumped backwards before the sparks had finished flying. Boyce braced his strength in his shoulders, expecting a second attack. At that same moment however, and even though he was supposed to have put distance between them just a moment ago, the gleam of steel drew a straight line from Gil’s right hand.

He had waited for the instant in which Boyce’s sword finished stretching forward.

The blade, broken at its base, pierced through the table. Without giving Boyce the time even to feel surprised, Gil unhesitatingly closed the distance between them and struck Boyce in the torso.

Boyce collapsed, crying out in pain.

Nearby, Jairus, his father, raised his voice in what was almost a shriek, yet Gil’s blade did not glisten with blood.

He had driven the hilt of his sword into the pit of Boyce’s stomach. Just from that, however, Boyce was in a state in which he could not expel a single breath, even though he felt like violently coughing. His back was bent and drool spilled from his open mouth as his body convulsed in spasms.

“My win, I believe.” Gil spoke without a trace of boasting.

He took two or three steps towards Boyce.

“Now then, as the winner of this duel, I have to right to give you an order.”

As he said so, for some reason he stretched out a hand towards Louise, who was standing side-by-side beside her brother.

“Boyce Abigoal, you will take Louise Peacelow, here present, as your wife. On the authority of the imperial family, I order you to get married.”

“Y-Your Highness!”

Gil gave an amused-looking glance towards the horrified Raymond and the startled Louise, whose eyes were open wide.

“Oh? It looks like the winner is the one most displeased with this decision. Well, certainly I was no more than a stand-in for this duel. Having said that, it wouldn’t look good for the imperial family or me to withdraw an order once it’s been given. Now then, what to do, huh...”

Gil pretended to ponder. Be it the Peacelow siblings, Jairus or, naturally, Boyce, who could now only shiver in agony, all of them remained silent, looking as though they had no idea what was going on.

“Right. In that case, my next order is that Boyce Abigoal and Louise get divorced. The two of you will certainly have been tied together in marriage for a time, but that connection will have been severed by order of the imperial family. That way works well.”

Raymond was flabbergasted. He knew perfectly well that Gil Mephius was not someone who simply went around babbling nonsense.

And then, he realised.

As a follower of the Badyne faith, Louise was virtually obliged to marry Boyce, the one who had taken her chastity. Therefore, by having the two of them get married, Gil was allowing her to accomplish that duty before using the power of the imperial family to have them divorce.

Even though it was impossible to so quickly heal the severe injury to Louise Peacelow’s

heart, with this at least she would be freed from one predicament.

Before he noticed it, Raymond's cheeks were once again wet with tears. He embraced his little sister by the shoulders as he hugged her firmly to his chest.

Nedain had fallen.

Two more generals, Folker and Yuriah, had joined the crown prince's camp.

Just a few days after the news shook Solon, an official messenger from the emperor arrived in Nedain. Unlike previously, in Apta, this messenger met with Gil.

The message he carried from the emperor was enough to astound everyone.

Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius was invited to go to Solon.

AFTERWORD

This series has finally reached the ten-volume mark. At first, I simply wanted to celebrate, but then, I noticed something horrifying.

Last year (2011), I, Sugihara Tomonori, reached the point of it being ten years since my debut. Even though I always feel young, my real age is already XX years old. Hahaha, so this is the trap of a decade having passed. No but, the passage of time is truly a terrifying thing. Ha, ha, ha... ha.

Setting aside the shock that the writer unexpectedly received, with this volume, 'Rakuin no Monshou' is finally headed towards its climax. What will be the shape of the conclusion to the story of the boy who wore the crown prince's mask? Don't miss it.

– Although it's good to build up anticipation for it, the truth is, I've only settled on the broad outline of the conclusion, and the small details from here on still haven't been finalized.

Orba looks like he will be facing a tough road to go in the last part of the story, and the author's struggle will also be fierce, but I won't give up!

--Sugihara Tomonori



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